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Embodied narratives: Ways of reading student literacy histories

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**EMBODIED NARRATIVES:
WAYS OF READING
STUDENT LITERACY HISTORIES**

BY
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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
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COME THEN. WHAT IS IT TO BE LITERATE? We have to draw our own maps, trace our own histories, acknowledge our own debts and consider ways not taken. Our literacy autobiographies reveal riches and gaps, but these narratives are not tales of solitary journeys. We are always in dialogue with others—those who taught us to read, those for whom we wrote, who lent us books, shaped our preferences, encouraged us, forbade us even. They were dead poets, living authors, cynical critics. We remember them as friends who made our world more hospitable, who helped us as we read and wrote, to discover who we were and who we could become.

—Margaret Meek, *On Being Literate*

Preface

In this study, *EMBODIED NARRATIVES: Ways of Reading Student Literacy Histories* I examine the ways students construe their relationships to literacy and their sense of themselves as writers. I have been studying students' attitudes and prior experiences with reading and writing in and out of school to see how their experiences may affect the way they approach composition instruction. The histories reflect the fact that large numbers of first year writers have negative views about themselves as writers. I argue these self-portrayals are potentially damaging in terms of their future growth as learners. I also argue that it's possible that the very act of consciously composing a literacy narrative, (a short history of reading and writing activities, in and out of school)—can provide an alternative framework for understanding the past events of one's life and for planning future actions. For me, the following poem, "*Contrary To Rule*" epitomizes a certain bodily prose style I have come to love and recognize as particular to student literacy narratives.

Contrary to Rule

I loved them best: the cross-
dressers, the white-lipped
bullyboys and the big-breasted
naughty girls, the ones who sucked
their thumbs, dangerous, behind long
black bangs. Those nail-bitten
fatfisted irregulars

made grammar class
impossible. Lawless
behind their desks, they
twisted rubber bands
to purple their fingers,
scratched curses
in the precious maple,
or tipped their chairs
against the wall, tempting
that one, spectacular fall.
The blinkered ones, sharp
as Number 2's and ever ready
for their A's, could smell them:
crotch-warm, cigarette-soured,
and squirmed
helpless in their seats.
Don't call on them
their rabbit eyes
pleaded with mine, their legs
twitching in the close
air of the room.
How could I not?
To questions concerning usage
and syntax, those Humpty Dumpty
teeterers answered
food, shelter, sex.
—Kimberly Cloutier Green

WHAT attracts me to "*Contrary to Rule*" is the way the poet captures the wild energy field of the writing classroom. Primacy is given to the touch, smell and feel of bodies. They are "fatfisted" and "nail-bitten" and "crotch-warm"; they squirm, twitch and teeter. The poet leads me back to Bakhtin who teaches me to see how "...the earthy, sensuous... qualities of everyday life [have] a tremendous symbolic power to combat the 'monolithic seriousness' of officialdom" (Gardiner 67). The speaker notes this same active and passive resistance. For these reasons, "*Contrary To Rule*" serves as a useful bridge into

this study of embodied narratives of schooled literacy as they are rendered in the literacy histories of first year college students.

"Contrary to Rule" is a poem that captures the transgressive nature of certain classroom bodies. And by "classroom bodies" I mean to make a distinction between the performance of self in a classroom, and the performance of self, say, with friends, or family. There seem to be learned rituals of behavior that accompany classroom bodies, and I take this up in more detail in **Chapter 5: Transgressive Narratives**.¹ I argue that something is being resisted and this resistance is a possible site for learning for both teachers and students. A lot of students' nervousness gets conveyed as resistance. I examine the ways teaching can be a nervous practice and school, itself, a nervous system.

When I began to teach I was not prepared for the incredible amount of energy it seemed to require of me. Every teaching/conferencing day was like a climb up Kilimanjaro. We really don't have the language to capture this particular kind of fatigue. I always think of the Adrienne Rich lines, *"It will take all your breath, It will take all your energy."* And it will. When I think of the mix of

¹ See Peter McLaren, *Schooling As A Ritual Performance: Toward a Political Economy of Educational Symbols and Gestures*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 1999. "McLaren treats resistance as a form of social drama. As instances of 'breach', acts of buffoonary, ribaldry, constant carping on classroom rules, making non-negotiable demands, looking and acting bored, and striking intimidatory poses are all elements 'of the fight to establish the street corner state inside the suite'" (Henry A. Giroux, Foreword).

all the disparate readings carefully juxtaposed, and all of the student bodies with all the accompanying complexity of their lives, and coupled with my own rich, full, busy life—it is simply staggering. There are lesson plans to be created, names to remember and faces to come to know. There is the need to look into the future to upcoming deadlines and the constant need to look back in reflection. In this way, every classroom is a virtual energy field.

In a new book by Don Graves, *The Energy To Teach*, teachers are asked “*what gives you energy, what takes it away, and what is a waste of time?*” (4). Graves says he’s been able to stay on “the upward spiral” through a fundamental pragmatism fueled by simple questions: “*what works for living and learning? What’s fair? What’s just?*” I ask these same questions of myself and of my students, and they are questions to hold in mind as you read this study. In immersing myself in the reading of students’ literacy narratives I am given an extra reserve of energy to teach. I think it comes from knowing a little about the particularities of each individual student. I hope that by taking their own histories seriously, as a potential source of wisdom, students are able to proceed on to a new kind of footing, fostered by a changed self-awareness.

Don Graves also observes that “*what educates and releases significant energy in students is not methodologies but carefully orchestrated classroom conditions*” (34). Simply acknowledging that my students’ raw energy precedes all learning and teaching has helped me to re-imagine the teaching enterprise, which I talk about in the **Chapter 7: “Changing The Writer’s Sense of Self in The Visual, Textual, Tactile**

Composition Classroom." So I continually strive to find ways to tap into this energy, the way the mills in this New Hampshire landscape draw power from the rivers. I hope to show how this study stems from this place of sometimes overlooked, sometimes untapped power.

Student stories explain the charged atmosphere I feel walking into any new classroom. Different students bring different energies: the "blinker ones/ sharp as Number 2's and ever ready for their A's" (**Ch.4 Rise To Success Narratives**) and the "lawless" ones, who tip "their chairs/ against the wall, tempting/ that one, spectacular fall" (**Ch.5 Transgressive Narratives**). They have experienced and lived through a number of English classes by the time they come to their first year college classroom. They know a thing or two about what they "like" and what they "hate." Some feel power and confidence in their ability to write and read with ease. Some can eloquently trace the path of former teachers who've inspired them, or pushed them to be more than they thought was possible. However, something happens in the shift from home-sponsored reading to school-sponsored reading. Studies show there is a noticeable drop-off in both the interest and frequency in reading activities around the middle-school years.² About this time, there are more tales of writers feeling wounded. Some work hard to hide what they feel are basic incompetences. Some harbor negative feelings about English as a subject with no bearing on their day-to-day

² See Wendy Atwell-Vasey who describes the alienation and distancing that so often characterizes curriculum in schools in *Nourishing Words: Bridging Private Reading and Public Teaching*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1998.

lives, a subject that requires a great deal of time spent reading and writing; time perhaps better spent in “living.”

I gravitate toward the stories that seem to be “contrary to rule,” because I’m interested in how literacy narratives work as sites of rebellion, as well as what they can teach us as teachers about our own pedagogical theories and practices. So many of the literacy narratives I read contain stories of feeling “wronged” by various assignments, various teachers and the “system” of education in general.³ Although I’m indebted to the other researchers in the field who have studied literacy narratives (Eldred and Mortensen, Brodkey, Brandt, Soliday—**Introduction**), the stories that follow here seem to fall a little outside of the margins of the research I’ve read. This work departs from those studies in the fact that I don’t attempt a systematic content analysis, but rather I’ve chosen to focus on patterns of moments, or “patterns of personas” (as successful, transgressive, stigmatized...) students compose in the narratives. My method is to locate “key clues or symptoms, or what literary critics call *aporia*, sites of doubt or perplexity where the apparent coherence of a text can be unraveled” (Tobin 29). For example, in the poem I circle and hover around key words in the cited poem: words like “dangerous,” “irregular,” “lawless,” “impossible,” “helpless,” believing each charged word has a story. Who is “*dangerous*?” Who is “*irregular*?” Who is “*impossible*?” Who has the power to say? I am always aware that “perception is marked by an internal, constitutive relation to wider struggles

over power, legitimacy and authority" (Gardiner 71). The poem highlights a "gap," ... "to questions concerning usage/ and syntax, those Humpty Dumpty/ teeterers answered/ food, shelter, sex." These lines remind me that our official curriculums don't always acknowledge the importance of other embodied senses: like seeing, smelling, touching, hearing. The poem exposes the question, "where do we find sustenance and pleasure in education?—a question I take up in this study as I consider what it means to be "literate." Some answers to the question of "meaning" are housed in the stories my students carry around in their nervous systems. As Richard Miller says, when you feel "nervous" you can be sure that your education is working on you. The moments that seem "contrary to rule" often expose our structures, our rules, and can lead us to examine our pedagogies with new eyes.

"*Contrary to Rule*," much like the literacy narrative moments that comprise this study, capture the ways in which human subjects shape or mis-shape the learning setting, or how they are shaped or mis-shaped by this same setting. I also examine similar class dynamics: the students in relationship to other students, the students in relationship to the teacher, the teacher in relationship to the institution and the requirements of curriculum, and the teacher in

³ See Sacks, Peter. *Standardized Minds: The High Price of America's Testing Culture and What We Can Do To Change It*. MA: Perseus Publishing, 1999.

relationship to herself.⁴ In a few quick strokes, the poet paints the strange combination of electric energy and deadening boredom.

She renders the emotional and geographical terrain of writing relationships that Lad Tobin describes candidly in his book, *Writing Relationships: What Really Happens in the Composition Class* (1993). While Tobin examines specific life settings: the writing conference, the writing classroom, the teacher's lounge---I focus my attention on the re-created settings of students' past educational experiences crafted in the literacy narratives. What literacy stories do students have to tell? What does the classroom look like to them? What do they see when they look at and listen to their various teachers? What do they take away with them at the end of a writing class? What gets stored in memory? What has been their relationship to words, texts, and language. Like those who beg the persona not to "call on them/ their rabbit eyes/ pleaded with mine, their legs/ twitching in the close/ air of our room./ How could I not?" in this dissertation, I hope to call on those who might not have been called on, those who have sat back silently.

After closely reading over one-hundred literacy narratives I introduce four key threads: the presence of teachers as heroes & anti-heroes, the recurrence of the equation made by students between "literacy" and "success," the predominance of instances of transgressive behavior in the face of schooling, and

⁴ See Peter Maas Taubman, *"The Callings of Sexuality."* He writes, "because teaching and learning occur in relationships and because the dynamics of the classroom are intersubjective, teachers, like parents, engage in attuning, misattunement and social referencing all the time."

“stigma narratives”, the idea that from time to time students manage what Erving Goffman calls a “spoiled identity.” I highlight the way some students, like “the white-lipped/ bullyboys and big-breasted/ naughty girls,” manage to slip through the school system without receiving much sustenance in the way of emotional and intellectual knowledge. I hope to show how even “the blinkered ones, sharp/ as Number 2’s and ever ready/ for their A’s” are sometimes marked by fear. I’ll demonstrate that studying the way space gets recreated in the literacy narrative as tight and airless, the way the speaker of this poem describes “the close air of our room”, can help us to create a different sort of learning environment in the writing classroom. Literacy narratives act like jumper cables for me—they help me to jump-start each new class and I have begun to believe that in writing literacy narratives students may begin to revise an often limited and closed perception of themselves as learners and writers.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
PREFACE	viii
LIST OF PLATES	xx
ABSTRACT	xxi

CHAPTER	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	1
Beginnings.....	2
The Aim of This Study.....	5
The Fault Lines.....	7
An Attempt To Combat a Diminished View of Writing and a Diminishing View of the Student Writer	12
In Defense of "Story"	15
Brief Literature Review	20
The Art of Embellishing	22
The Structure	30
 I. INVITING LITERACY HISTORIES	
In The Beginning	32
Film Clips	33
In-Class Freewriting	35
Are We What We Read and Write?	37
The Assignment	42
Writing Workshop	44
Literacy Moments Illustrated	45

II. A RATIONALE FOR WHY AND HOW TO READ THE LITERACY HISTORIES.....	56
Ways of Reading	57
Body Memory	58
The Self Contains Multitudes	59
Memory and Imagination	59
<i>Their</i> Story	60
Literacy Leads	61
A Case Study	65
 III. HEROES AND ANTI-HEROES: TEACHERS EMBODIED IN STUDENT LITERACY HISTORIES.....	 70
A Gallery of Teachers	74
Cultivating A Writer's Voice	74
The Feel of the Method	77
The Constraints and Opportunities For Agency	77
The Composition Class as Expanded or Contracted Space	79
<i>"What Do You Want?"</i> —How Ideology Undergirds Writing Assignments	80
Ways of Reading	81
Teacher Eccentricities	86
Excerpts From the Narratives	87
<i>"Sister Rosetta"</i>	91
<i>"Everything But The Kitchen Sink"</i> : An Eclectic Curriculum ..	93
Multi-Media Lessons	95
Passion Performed	96
 IV. "RISE TO SUCCESS" NARRATIVES: LITERACY AS ACCUMULATION, DISPLAY AND CONSUMPTION.....	 99
<i>"Bettering Oneself"</i>	106
Ways of Reading	106
Reading For Prizes	111
Ways of Reading	113
Child Prodigy Narratives	115
Ways of Reading	117
<i>"Act As If"</i> Narratives	118
What Gets Lost in the Rise To Success Convention	119
Success	124
Pursuing "Hints"	126

V. TRANSGRESSIVE NARRATIVES: RESISTING	
THE PREVAILING CULTURE OF SCHOOL	129
Three Teacher's Stories of Transgression	133
Excerpts of Transgressive Moments In	
Student Literacy Histories	136
Ways of Reading	140
A Rugby Narrative or Literacy Narrative or Both	141
Seeing Is Never Simple	143
VI. STIGMA NARRATIVES AND	
"SPOILED IDENTITIES"	146
Seizing The Occasion	150
Highlighting A Dialectic of Then and Now.....	151
Moments of Stigma From the Literacy Histories	152
Ways of Reading	153
<i>"Invisible"</i> : Case Study of A Stigma Narrative	155
The Performance of "Underlife" and the Necessity of	
Unpacking "Invisibility"	156
"Playing Dress Up"	158
The First Day of School	161
Ms. DeCostal As "Anti-Hero"	163
Clean Bodies and Clean Prose	166
Faith in Narration: The Past as Undesirable Other"	168
VII. RE-IMAGINING THE WRITER'S SENSE OF SELF	171
The Fictional Quality of Literacy Histories	171
Revisionist Historiography	177
Goals of Literacy Instruction	182
Inviting Collage Essays, Meditations, Art & Other Exploratory	
Writing/ Activities	183
We Think As Bodies	186
WORKS CITED	191
APPENDICES	199

LIST OF PLATES

Plate 1	43
Plate 2	44
Plate 3	46
Plate 4	47

ABSTRACT

**EMBODIED NARRATIVES:
WAYS OF READING
STUDENT LITERACY HISTORIES**

by

Stephanie Paterson

University of New Hampshire, May 2001

WHEN asked about their former experiences and attitudes towards reading and writing first-year students often begin with statements like, *"I don't know how to write,"* or *"I'm not a big reader,"* or *"I'm not creative."* Behind these facile and familiar sentences is a world of experience we know very little about and are hard-pressed to explain.

Students are situated on a precarious fault line within the academy and their narratives function like maps of this treacherous terrain. Their stories do not simply reflect personal, private crises but cultural phenomena—including taken-for-granted issues surrounding the "necessity" of discipline and an almost shocking attention to "cleanliness" in relation to the body and the body's prose. My aim, in part, is to question how culture acts in the classroom in ways that are not always apparent.

I show how students serve as cultural critics in crafting their literacy histories, pointing to a fundamental incoherence in what we believe constitutes

good writing, academic excellence and “success.” One of the purposes and central challenges in this dissertation is to develop ways to “listen to...the competing cultural logics” that students’ stories expose (Ratcliffe 214).

In this qualitative research study I pursue two strands of inquiry: 1. What can literacy histories teach us about students’ conceptual strategies developed over a lifetime of schooled literacy, and 2. What can we discover about successful and unsuccessful pedagogical practices as seen through their eyes.

In reading over one hundred literacy histories written by first year writers at the University of New Hampshire I’ve noticed that several conventional patterns of narration emerge: “*The Rise To Success*,” “*Stigma Narratives*,” “*Transgressive Narratives*,” as well as telling portraits of teachers in and out of school. In examining these patterns I weave a close reading of student texts with literary texts. My readings are informed by a broad range of works in the fields of cultural studies, feminist studies, rhetorical theory and ethnography. I describe the ways “students’ stories often confound, correct, explode, or refine writing theorists’ constructs, researchers’ findings and teachers’ assumptions” (Bishop 177).

Introduction

...few students enter college confident that anything they learn about writing from writing assignments or from anything a teacher or student says about their writing will be of much value to them. There are any number of explanations of how so many students might have independently learned such terrible lessons about writing and themselves...

— Linda Brodkey, *Writing Permitted in Designated Areas Only*

WHILE there are a lot of things to celebrate about the power of literacy to shape a life in positive ways, there is a lot involved in schooled literacy that is troubling and leaves scars. Not many go through the process of institutionalized schooling totally unscathed. We are all “marked markers” as DuPlessis says.¹ In “*The Erasure of the Sentence*” Connors observes that “when a phenomenon is hard to see or define, looking at what it has done may point to important realities about it...as in a tornado documentary, the effects exist as a trail of destruction” (121-22). In response to prompts about their attitudes and experiences towards writing and reading students often begin with statements like, “*I don’t know how to write,*” or “*I’m not a big reader,*” or “*I’m not creative.*” Behind these facile and familiar sentences is a world of experience we know very little about and are hard-pressed to explain. I have made a study of the “effects” of schooled literacy

and in this study I attempt to offers “ways of reading” these very embodied narratives.

Beginnings

[Students’] struggles with writing occur very much in the world of their own perceptions and the social habitat they put themselves into through their understanding of events and practices; if we wish to influence them, in ways that will help them with their writing struggles, we must speak to their conditions. This means first recognizing what those conditions are.

—Charles Bazerman “Introduction II: Sketches
Toward a Rhetorical Theory of Literacy” in
Constructing Experience

IN order to better understand “the world of [my students’ perceptions] and the “social habitat they put themselves into through their understanding of events and practices”—I assign literacy histories in the first week of each new semester. Before I started collecting student literacy narratives some time around 1996 I had already begun voraciously reading published literacy narratives, in a variety of forms: memoir, creative non-fictional essays, fiction and poetry. It just happens that writers often write about characters who write or they write about their own processes and habits as writers. As a composition specialist I’m drawn to these scenes of literacy more than any other kind of writing.

¹ “DuPlessis describes the woman writer as ‘marked marker’: ideology, culture, representation will all inflect what she (re)marks, or notices, as what she herself marks, or notices, or writes” (Hogue 75).

In *“Reading Literacy Narratives,”* Janet Eldred and Peter Mortensen define this kind of writing as stories “that chronicle a [person’s] attempt to enter a new social (and discursive arena)” and narratives which include “explicit images of schooling and teaching” including texts that “both challenge and affirm culturally scripted ideas about literacy” (Eldred and Mortensen 513). Briefly, in literacy narratives, individuals explore the way literacy fits into their lives. They reflect both consciously and maybe unconsciously about emotional, intellectual and social benefits that are accrued through literate practices. In assigning literacy histories, I am asking students to reflectively examine the structures of their expression by examining their narrative in light of other students narratives and in light of the published examples of the literacy narratives we’ve read. (**Chapter 1: Inviting Literacy Narratives**). As Alan France says, “mere expression is not enough” (163).

Since literacy lessons get woven into a tight fabric of thought and belief the older one grows, it is useful for freshmen, who have just completed all of their primary and secondary schooling to reflect on how their English courses, other school experiences, or their literate practices (conceived more broadly) have shaped them.

On my list of published literacy narratives for the class are autobiographies (not listed chronologically) like Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative* and Mike Rose’s *Lives on the Boundary*, Sapphire’s novel *Push*, Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John*, Alice Kaplan’s, *French Lessons*, Mary Karr’s, *The Liars’ Club*, Cinthia

Gannett's *"The Grammar of Memory,"* Robert MacNeil's, *Wordstruck*, and Bell Hooks memoir *Bone Black: Memories of a Girlhood*. And I also include on this list Lynne Sharon Schwartz's, *Ruined By Reading* (1996), or Suzanne Juhasz's, "Prologue" to *Reading From the Heart: Women, Literature, and The Search For True Love* (1994), or Victor Villanueva Jr.'s, *Bootstraps: From An American Academic of Color* (1993). What all of these writers focus on, at one point or throughout the course of their work, is the effect of literacy on their lives.

Once I started to read for literacy narratives, the number of examples grew exponentially. I'd add to the list from the exciting proliferation of creative nonfiction pieces coming out in journals like *The Fourth Genre* or *Creative Nonfiction*, writing that explores what Eudora Welty has called, "*One Writer's Beginnings*." Stephen King's recent memoir, *On Writing* begins with a creative non-fictional piece entitled "C.V."—"a kind of *curriculum vitae*—my attempt to show how one writer was formed" (King 18). His narrative is divided in the shape of a "collage essay," with each numbered vignette humorously detailing how he came to be a writer and reader. A recent edition of *Creative Nonfiction* features an essay entitled "*Ghost Story*" by Jan Beatty which begins, "When I was growing up, I found my most profound sense of home in books—not the Great Books, but the cheesy mysteries of '60's popular culture—not the sweet inquisitive Nancy Drew, but the less refined Hardy Boys" (294). Jan Beatty, like the freshman students included in this study, attempts to articulate and refine

the meaning(s) she makes of certain literacy encounters, happening both in and out of school.

What is interesting is that Beatty's "most profound sense of home in books" came not from the school-sponsored "Great Books" curriculum, but through an alterior, self-sponsored reading of "the cheesy (Hardy Boys) mysteries of '60's popular culture" (294). Tensions like this one abound in the literacy narratives. As Beth Daniell writes, in a special issue of CCC subtitled, "*A Usable Past: CCC at 50*," literacy moments are "...marked by a tension between Foucauldian determinism and human agency showing the power of institutions to control people by controlling their literacy and the power of individuals and groups to use literacy to act either in concert with or in opposition to this power" (406). In this study I attempt to highlight this tension between "Foucauldian determinism" and "human agency" and to show how these two energies work together to shape both our representations/and our lived experiences of literacy.

The Aim of This Study

....even the most fragmentary and mundane stories
about literacy...give their authors the opportunity to
make these events strange and to reinterpret them
from the vantage point of a critical present

— Mary Soliday, "*Translating Self and Difference
Through Literacy Narratives*"

ACROSS about eight semesters at the University of New Hampshire, I saved approximately one hundred literacy narratives from first and second-year writing classrooms. To protect the identities of students I have changed all of the students'

names to pseudonyms. Pragmatically, I began to look at these histories with a belief that I “was more likely to draw students into an expansive, challenging, and rewarding view of education by accommodating their perspective than by simply resisting or ignoring it...” and because I “inescapably represent the institution of education [to students, I] have much to learn from the conceptual strategies students have spent a lifetime formulating” (Ernest 33).

So in this study I investigate the range of “performances” and narrative conventions students employ in order to compose their narratives. As Tom Newkirk shows in *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*, students borrow from the larger culture in composing their narratives, drawing on powerful traditions of sentimental and motivational writing (writing that is often out of favor in the academy). I will show how, unwittingly at times, students act as cultural critics reflecting on the incoherence of beliefs in American culture about what constitutes effective writing, academic excellence and “success.”

After studying the range of performances and available narrative conventions it is also possible to discover: (1.) What literacy narratives can teach us about student interests and biases in regards to literacy instruction and literacy practices and (2.) What the literacy histories teach us about our pedagogical practices as writing teachers.

In “*Sketches Toward a Rhetorical Theory of Literacy*,” Charles Bazerman provides a valuable rationale for why we all can benefit from critically theorizing about our own representations and practices of literacy. He says that we tend to

carry theories around in the organization of our nervous system, and our theories inform our practice, so we're wise to articulate our beliefs and values because they will "inevitably determine exactly what happens as we make our way through the day and thus what kind of days we live" (8). I can always tell when I'm holding on to an unprofitable view of my students or a not-quite-right curriculum because I feel bad. I feel tired. The slightest effort exhausts me. It's not about being physically tired, but rather being tired in spirit—and when this happens, I usually conclude that I'm holding on to a small theory causing me to have small days.

In shaping my own conception of literacy I follow Sylvia Scribner's advice in *"Literacy in Three Metaphors,"* to view literacy as a "many-meaninged thing." Although the temptation is always to look at literacy as an individual achievement, Scribner highlights the fact that individual literacy is relative to social literacy (72). She explores literacy through three metaphors: literacy as power, literacy as adaptation, and literacy as a state of grace. The boundaries between each of these metaphorical interpretations of literacy are also permeable and often overlap.

The Fault Lines

I have struggled a bit to find the speech to begin to articulate the ways these complex narratives are fraught with ideological tensions. I'll argue that

they contain a number of fault lines.² Without the ability to consciously articulate these ideological tensions, both a student's (and teacher's) sense of identity can unwittingly become eroded.

I have found that a close-reading of individual literacy narratives offers clues about various ideological battles that play out in school. To help me to better understand and articulate the ideological tensions I feel every time I construct a writing assignment, select a particular reading, or invoke a particular genre of writing, I turn to Gerald Graff in *Beyond the Culture Wars* and Gregory S. Jay in *American Literature and The Culture Wars*. Jay asks,

What is the aim of teaching 'American' literature? Is it the appreciation of artistry or the socialization of the reader? The achievement of cultural literacy or training in critical thinking? Can it be all these things without contradicting itself (or hopelessly confusing the student)? (Jay 5).

These are questions I have after reading students' literacy narratives. Why can't we re-read the literacy autobiographies with an eye for what values have been transmitted and how? So I've started to think about the writing, reading, and the critical re-reading as all ways to teach what Krista Ratcliffe calls "rhetorical listening" — a phrase used to capture how we are always continually negotiating our evolving standpoints, and our identities, with the always evolving standpoints of others (209). In writing and re-reading literacy narratives students confront their own construction of earlier versions of themselves. They

² I think the first time I encountered the term "fault line" was in Richard Miller's, "Fault Lines in The Contact Zone" in *College English*, Vol. 56, No. 4, April 1994.

see how they've changed. They see how they've adapted and how they've been socialized by reading and writing in school. By "rhetorically listening" to the words that comprise literacy narratives students come to embody a more elastic sense of self, able to recognize that "standpoints are not... points of stasis but rather complex webs of dynamically intermingled cultural structures and subjective agency" (Ratcliffe 209). And Ratcliffe continues, "...we may not always choose or control the discourses that socialize us; neither may we choose or control our unconscious responses to them. *But once we consciously articulate our socialization and choose to respond to them, we become responsible for our worlds, our attitudes, our actions*" (208).

What attracts me to this idea of "rhetorically listening" is the potential for a renewed sense of agency on the part of students. So often they hold on to a passive version of the self that may include accumulated fears stored up through years of schooling. Many see themselves as powerless and the victims of a long string of florescently-lit institutionalized classrooms each acting as its own culture with its own customs and with the student in the habit of having to read the teacher in order to understand the new customs and rituals. I also like the way Ratcliffe's vision extends beyond the classroom to "our worlds, our attitudes, our actions" because, ultimately, I hope students will have a sense of their own literacy as a potent force in their lives—one capable of carrying them over any number of thresholds.

Of course, this is not always the case—some literacy lessons are often worn like a garment or protective cover—and while some garments fit loosely, some garments are constricting. Richard Rodriguez in *The Hunger for Memory* is an example of someone who posits literacy as an ill-fitting garment. Rodriguez is never at peace with his newly acquired literacy skills including the ability to converse in academic discourse. He feels he's been forced to make a too sharp distinction between his private family life and his public schooled life and consequently, he thinks of his autobiographical memoir as consisting of "six chapters of sad, fuguelike repetition" (7). It is obvious that a large chasm is born in his pursuit of literacy which he seems unable to bridge.

Another large "fault line" in this study occurs in the fact that I am setting-bound when it comes to collecting data. The University of New Hampshire's undergraduate population is predominantly white and so there are certain limitations built into the structure of this ethnographic study—namely, a large portion of the American population is not represented here. I realize, working with a different population in a different setting would perhaps provide vastly differently conceptions of literacy and memories of schooling. The voices of students of color would only complicate and perhaps expose (or help me to see) the limitations in the work of reading I've begun here.

It is worth noting that in an earlier draft of this manuscript (when I introduce the readings compiled in the "literacy narrative packet") I referred to Malcolm X as "shaped and delimited by race." I mention this here in an effort to

practice the "*rhetorical listening*" Krista Ratcliffe recommends we all try. Looking back now the sentence strikes me as strangely bald, exposing something about my own perception. I have been socialized to see Malcolm X as "shaped and delimited by race" and to see myself immune to the shaping influences of these same forces. Gradually, I have been led to see the ways we are all always "shaped and delimited by race." I think of Professor John Ernest, who is known for saying, "we do not need to discuss race only when a person of color enters the room." His point is that race is with us all of the time (as my sentence attests). The "fault line" inherent in my sentence exposes my researcher's blindness (brought about to a certain extent by the culture and setting in which I live and work). The sentence makes me question my vision (my own whiteness) and how it is shaped and delimited by the larger culture which allows me to see certain things and to overlook other things. For me this relatively simple sentence opens up a complex web of questions: Why would I refer to Malcolm X as "shaped and delimited by race" and not say, Anne Lamott or Paul Thomas (two white writers mentioned in this study)? What exactly does it mean to have an identity that is shaped and delimited by race? How do I fix this gap in perception? Is "fixing" the sentence (i.e. revising my meaning) really the answer? Isn't the very notion of a "fix" a culturally loaded concept? In lieu of "fixing" perhaps I need ways to further enter into the issues raised by my sentence. Finally, all of these questions lead me to even more important

question: *how do we see and account for (as teachers as researchers) those who are not in the room?*

An Attempt to Combat A Diminished View of Writing and a Diminishing View of the Student Writer

One way I've found to address this sense of loss is to help students to increase the possibility of practicing "creative spontaneous rhetorical invention" (Bazerman 23). Bazerman calls "creative spontaneous rhetorical invention" the ability to meet local circumstances rather than defaulting to a "formulaic rehearsal of general procedures" (Bazerman 23). Robert L Root, Jr. describes this "formulaic" species of writing in his essay, *"Collage, Montage, Mosaic, Vignette, Episode, Segment,"* — a form of the essay to which students are well accustomed,

In the models of structure that composition textbooks traditionally provide, the ancient and venerable rhetorical topic of arrangement is handled by providing molds into which to pour the molten thought and language of the essay: comparison/contrast, thesis/support, process — all prefabricated shapes to be selected off the rack to fit the body of the topic — or the five-paragraph theme, the one-size fits-all product of the rhetorical department store. (364)

Janet Emig says this form of writing, characterized by the slow linear march of chronological meaning all mapped out in advance, is "so indigenously American it might be called 'the Fifty-Star Theme'" (97). By teaching writing partly as "creative spontaneous rhetorical invention," (**Conclusion**), I hope to provide a space wide enough for students to experiment with a variety of ways to build essay structures with their subjects that are organic. In the view of the full course, students are introduced to a wide range of forms and genres to fit a range

of occasions and audiences: they practice freewriting for exploration/reflection, writing peer responses, writing creative non-fictional essays and more traditional/formalist-type reading responses and then self-reflective letters of assessment and meaning-making to reflect on the project of the course as a whole.

From reading literacy narratives I have found (among a host of other insights) that two of the central reasons that literacy acts have become devoid of value, or that students register apathy/ambivalence when they write are because a history of being made to write “competent but dull papers following the explicit instructions of the teacher” (Bazerman 21). This kind of writing has bred writers who are “more cautious, rule-seeking, [with] less-ambitious attitude(s) to new writing situations. (Bazerman 21). And as Charles Bazerman notes in “*A Rhetorical Theory of Literacy*,”

A history of failures, humiliations, and rejections in literate encounters [tend to]create aversiveness, anxiety, and defensiveness surrounding literate encounters. These negative emotions and behaviors will only reinforce any lack of skills. Together the aversive reactions and lack of skills make future positive writing experiences less likely, so the individual will lose the motive to write in any circumstance. (22)

When I think about why so many freshman students feel dubious about writing in school, I think of Parker Palmer’s book, *The Courage To Teach*. Palmer argues that sometimes educators fall into the trap of thinking of students en masse, as a “student body,” as opposed to distinct personalities with individual histories. Stereotypes of students float freely in faculty culture (41). Palmer

speculates in somewhat grim terms about the effects of this kind of group-thought-process on our educational practices. He writes facetiously, employing the rhetoric of “cure.”³

The dominant diagnosis, to put it bluntly, is that our ‘patients’ [and here he is referring to students] are brain-dead. Small wonder, then, that the dominant treatment is to drip bits into our students’ veins, wheeling their comatose forms from one information source to the next until the prescribed course of treatment is complete, hoping they will absorb enough intellectual nutrients to maintain their vital signs until they have graduated – and paid their tuition in full.

That caricature highlights a truth: our assumption that students are brain-dead leads to pedagogies that deaden their brains. When we teach by dripping information into their passive forms, students who arrive in the classroom alive and well become passive consumers of knowledge and are dead on departure when they graduate. But the power of this self-fulfilling prophecy seems to elude us: we rarely consider that our students may die in the classroom because we use methods that assume they are dead.

(Palmer 41-42)

Palmer (invoking Freire’s “Banking Model of Education” in *Pedagogy of The Oppressed*, to switch from a medical model to a business model) is a significant voice in the literature about teaching because he takes a generous position towards defending students’ ambivalence toward the classroom setting. Without intending to demonize teachers at the expense of defending students, I invoke Palmer because he leads me to a sympathetic reading of student apathy that in turn galvanizes me to search for more productive and inventive teaching

³ See Winnicott, *Home Is Where We Start From*. Winnicott unpacks the complex meanings of the word “cure” and writes, “cure, in the sense of remedy, successful eradication of disease and its cause, tends today to overlay cure as care. Medical practitioners are all the time engaged in a battle to prevent the two meanings of the word from losing touch with each other” (113).

practices. His overall perspective in *The Courage To Teach* is compassionate toward the struggles teachers face when confronted with an absolutely huge spectrum of factors and conditions to negotiate in setting-up and maintaining productive learning environments. In my mind, the very act of writing a literacy narrative shifts the dynamic of the classroom tremendously. It gives students the message right away that what they have lived and already learned is of value and interest.

In Defense of “Story”

Haroun: But why do you hate stories so much? Stories are fun...

Khattam-Shud: The world, however, is not for Fun. The world is for Controlling.

Haroun: Which world?

Khattam-Shud: Your world, my world, all worlds. They are there to be ruled.

—Salmon Rushdie, *Haroun and The Sea of Stories*

Unfortunately, within the field of Composition and perhaps within academic culture at large, another crucial “fault line” coloring the reception of narratives is the widespread distrust and dismissal of “story” as a less-than-academic enterprise. As Joseph F. Trimmer observes in his “Introduction” to *Narration As Knowledge: Tales of the Teaching Life*,

We became English teachers because we loved stories. We loved reading them, writing them, and talking about them. We loved the way they intensified our lives and helped us understand other lives. But as we worked our way into our professional lives, we slowly, almost imperceptibly changed our attitude toward stories. We lived in a world that did not trust them. Stories were not true. Stories were not reliable. If we wanted to keep stories in our lives, we had to

convert them into something else. Something more serious. More scientific. (x)

This is yet another of the central tensions invoked in this study of literacy narratives. I've been led to reconsider the ways in which we all learn (students included) to deprecate story as a somehow pedestrian, less-than-intellectual activity. This view is reflected by Ann Berthoff in a *College English* article when she says, "'personal narratives' rival impersonal exposition in tedium" (676). To illustrate her point she uses a cartoon of a woman talking on the phone, "'Yes,' she says, 'every one has his own story to tell. It's very unfortunate'" (Berthoff 676). Berthoff goes so far as to say that "two gangster theories...have alternately terrorized...teachers of English: indeterminacy and its corollary, misreading; and the idea that we all, necessarily, tell stories" (673). She seems to need to protect an historically revered hierarchy as she argues that, "to say that we all tell stories is to lose a distinction invaluable to the defense of poetry and indispensable to the conception of the scientific method" (676).

In the same issue of *College English*, Randy Bass in "Story and Archive" laments the "dissolution of the hierarchical relationship" of story to archive, and elaborates on this theme,

In the full scope of the profession, through the widespread interest in popular culture and non-literary texts, the recovery of multiple rhetorical cultures and expressive histories, and the complication of meaning-making between a text and its contexts, the relationship between story and archive [has been] leveled, changing from a rigid positioning of figure and ground to a matrix of centers and margins, junctures and lines. (Bass 660)

I think the fact that we all live in “a matrix of centers and margins, junctures and lines” is really a cause for celebration. And so too is the disciplinary interest in “popular culture and non-literary texts” and “the recovery of multiple rhetorical cultures and expressive histories.” And I would argue (and I think student literacy narratives attest to this fact in a range of ways) that the loss of “rigid positioning” is really not lost at all unfortunately, but is very much alive and well.

Somehow Berthoff attributes the slow death of “close reading” (something I was not aware had occurred) to the influx of “story” and argues that, “the value that Practical Criticism has for us, seventy years after it first appeared, is precisely that it assures the logical role for interpretation” (Berthoff 676). It would seem that in Berthoff’s lexicon, “story” is something divorced from interpretation. I think in this way she refers to a stereotype of story – not a real flesh and blood story, but a hollow, distorted caricature of story. The result is that she diminishes “story’s” potentiality as a very complex performance. She imagines what Cindy Gannett describes in “One Or Two Things I Know For Sure,” the *Introduction* to a new collection on *The Personal Narrative* as “one image we bring to this collection is that of the well-worn, even outworn, or worn-out image of a ‘school genre,’ limited, confessional in theme (loss of pet or relative, the big game, the prom...” but Gannett continues, “...given that the self may be constructed by multiple discourses, personal narratives cannot be inherently solipsistic nor need they construct a singular static self” (ix). Berthoff, I think,

also fails to see the ways that stories often contain their own instructions for readers reading. Sometimes, for example, the very act of freezing a moment in time is a narrative way of offering up an “interpretation” or a particular “take” on an experience.

Finally, she ends on the all too familiar note of alarm (reminiscent of the rhetoric from *A Nation at Risk*) by labelling “story” as a “gangster theory” which threatens the “survival” of English departments. She writes, more in the tone of a tired rant than a grounded reflection,

I believe that unless and until reading and writing are taught together—and are taught together with discussion—there will be little chance that English departments will survive as anything but outposts of sociology. But teaching writing as a way of learning to read and reading closely as a model for careful writing is a to guide students to the discovery of the powers of language: should that not be the chief mission of any and all English departments? (Berthoff 680)

I teach “story” via the literacy narratives to teach writing “as a way of learning to read and reading closely as a model for careful writing” to “guide students to the discovery of the power of language” (Berthoff 680). There is a redemptive moment in Bass’s article, as he admits that “knowledge-making depends on the creative straining of the story against the archive. That’s where meaning lives; that’s where learning comes from” (Bass 661). Here I agree that we need to strain the story against the archive is to say that we need a self and a world and the two to be in a dialectical relationship—we need memory *and* history.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *Getting A Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography* (1996) offer a counter-narrative to Berthoff and Bass's negative readings of "story":

On a daily basis, then, personal narrators assume the role of bricoleur who takes up bits and pieces of the identities and narrative forms available and, by disjoining and joining them in excessive ways, creates a history of the subject at a precise point in time and space. Such tactics of autobiographical storytelling become one of the means by which the narrating subject 'constantly manipulate[s] events in order to turn them into 'opportunities.' (14)

And they go on further to say,

Through assembling autobiographical memories one more time, personal narrators can turn an interpretation of and judgment about the past, however inflected by previous knowledge into a counter-memory. That is, they can remake their understanding of the 'truth' of the past and reframe the present by brining it into new alignment of meaning with the past. (14)

Granted, not every student can make this critical turn of remaking his/her understanding of the "truth" of the present by re-framing a reading of the past, but nevertheless, this educative potential exists in autobiographical narratives, such as the literacy narrative. Smith and Watson beautifully articulate the way "story" can work to help students to shift from subject to agent "capable of exercising control over the meaning of their lives"

To continue to counteract these diminishing views of "story" we can view the writing and reading of literacy narratives as a "real" event. They invite the opportunity for real peer exchange and learning. Students generally like to talk

about their own experiences, so it's crucial to create a protected space to swap writings and have this dialogue. As Bazerman writes,

A general sense of a text's being read and having some influence on readers is in itself a social reward that helps integrate the person into a discursive social group. The writer feels heard and part of what the group is doing. Such integration lends confidence to future writing and encourages continued participation in that discursive formation. The writer has created an identity upon a social stage and thus builds a stake in that identity. (Bazerman 25)

So these literacy histories are not "mere storytelling" but rather another step in the critical process of developing a sense of a coherent self across time that recognizes the value of writing both to communicate the self and to act in the world.

A Brief Literature Review about the Use of Literacy Narratives in the Field of Composition

...literacy also plays a powerful role in the interior working-out of who we are and how we decide what will be the conduct of our day-to-day lives.

—Sharon Jean Hamilton, "Preface" *My Name's Not Susie: A Life Transformed By Literacy*

THERE ARE a number of key texts that act as a backdrop to this study, which shape and inform my examination of literacy narratives. In the next two chapters I explain how I assign literacy histories and in **Chapter 2** how I read the narratives. What follows are seven articles which this study builds upon. For me a few of the key texts on the genre include: Mary Soliday's, "*Translating Self and Difference Through Literacy Narratives*," Sharon Jean Hamilton's, *My Name's Not Susie: A Life Transformed By Literacy*, Lester Knotts, "Personal Literacy

Experience", Deborah Brandt in *"Remembering Writing, Remembering Reading"*, Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen, *"Reading Literacy Narratives,"*, and Linda Brodkey, *"Writing on the Bias."*⁴

Mary Soliday generates energy and enthusiasm for student's critical powers as readers and writers of their own life texts in her article, *"Translating Self and Difference Through Literacy Narrative."* For her methodology, Soliday chooses to focus on a single student whose work in two separate essays reveals her growing ability to navigate between language worlds. Her student demonstrates that *the process of narrating key junctures in one's schooling helps to "defamiliarize quotidian reality"* and to look at what happened back there in the past as something not inevitable and taken-for-granted, but "unusual and strange" (511 italics added). Soliday explains her pedagogical rationale for implementing literacy narratives in the following:

At their very best, literacy narratives provide a space where students like Alisha can defamiliarize their ordinary language use and perform imaginative acts of self-representation in order... to translate 'between the two stories and two vocabularies' [home and school] 'without being split by difference.' Students' stories of everyday life enhance their personal success as writers in the university; these stories can also deepen their teachers' understanding of differences and shape their responses to today's competing versions of multiculturalism. In this way, literacy narratives contribute to the broader goal of building a more dialogical, multicultural curriculum that... respects and responds to—the voices and stories of individual writers. (Soliday 522-23)

⁴ This is by no means an exhaustive survey. For a more extensive overview see: *LITERACY: A Critical Sourcebook*, Edited by Ellen Cushman et. al. Boston, New York: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2001.

The Art of Embellishing

Another interesting strand of discussion in Soliday's essay is the question of to what extent these recollections may be embellished (Soliday 513). And she explains:

Within our families we routinely practice representing, even fictionalizing, the nature of literacy to ourselves in ways that are probably culturally specific: parents tell stories of their children's achievements with literacy at school or of their successes and failures in learning to read and write, and pre-school children tell stories, for example by embedding literacy events within the plots of other stories they tell. (513)

She raises an interesting point about the factuality of these narratives which is a critical theme I come back to in **Chapter 7**. Briefly, the point for me has never been whether or not these narratives are verifiably factual, but rather the fact that these are the ways students remember events. These charged memories offer a kind of cultural and political analysis [in their critiques of family and schooling] which in turn allows for political interpretation of events.⁵

My Name Is Not Susie: A Life Transformed By Literacy (1995) is Sharon Jean Hamilton's extraordinarily moving embodied history of literacy. Hamilton calls

⁵ Carolyn Steedman in *Landscape For a Good Woman: The Story of Two Lives* (1994) is another writer who has helped me to see the ways "personal interpretations of past time—the stories that people tell of themselves in order to explain how they got to the place they currently inhabit—are often in deep and ambiguous conflict with the official interpretive devices of a culture" (6).

attention to the site of the body as a locale for control from outside sources: parents, schooling, and the powerful ideological forces of race, class and gender. From Hamilton, I borrow the idea that we learn our categories from our family, our schooling, and our culture (114). She explains,

. . .good and bad, right and wrong, what kinds of people are good, what kind of behavior is appropriate, what kind of language is appropriate, what kind of books are good... The process of developing one's categories is so culturally immersed it is almost invisible; the categories themselves seem a natural and inevitable part of us.
(Hamilton 114)

Hamilton reminds me that literacy can be one of the ways out of a "a narrow world of fear and hopelessness" (Hamilton xi). As her opening lead attests, "Literacy salvaged my life, it is as simple as that" (Hamilton xiii). She works (as Janice Lauer observes in the *Foreword*) as both scholar and subject, the teller and the told, constructing her conflicting selves in the process (xii). She counters voices like Berthoff and Bass who would diminish the importance of "story" in the intellectual and emotional formation of identity in saying, "It was a whole new lesson for me to learn much later that the dramas of our lives can be as soul-searching and soul-shaping as the great dramas of literature" (xiii). The central thesis of the book is writing is immensely healing both in her own life and in the lives of her students who at times have "been so lost in their own pain that they could find no way out" and who have been "so far out of touch with their own

thoughts and feelings that they can find no way in" (xiv).⁶

Hamilton refers to three students in particular (Angie Martin, Stephanie Rodriguez, and Ann Nicholas) who helped her to write her literacy narrative. My study extends the discussion Hamilton started by looking more deeply at an even wider range of student narratives/student voices, in an attempt to flesh out patterns of narration as well as to examine the usefulness of certain learned subject positions.

Deborah Brandt's study dovetails Soliday's in the sense that Brandt also examines the ways that sites of literacy often reflect "contact zones" where private and public identities clash and grapple for power in her fascinating study entitled, *"Remembering Writing, Remembering Reading"* (1994). Brandt interviews a broad cross-section of people in Dane County, Wisconsin and asks them to focus on what they remember about learning to read and write: (occasions, people, materials, motivations, and uses and purposes of literacy), and from her interviews she identifies emergent patterns, speculates on the possible causes and effects of these differences in the trajectory of a life, and explores implications for future research and teaching in writing (460). Brandt notes that the brunt of previous research has focused on "abilities to handle textual

⁶ For a terrific study of the cutting-edge scientific research on the subject, including dozens of stories of famous writers who illuminate the theory that writing can repair pain, See Louise DeSalvo, *Writing As A Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives*. New York: Harper Collins, 1999.

language in ways peculiar to academic tasks, such as writing from sources or rendering literary interpretations,” (476) rather than on the cultural experiences and attitudes of writers and readers. Brandt concludes: “The actual conditions in which people encounter writing and reading are important to consider because they influence the meanings and feelings that people bring to the two enterprises and can influence the ways people pass on literacy to subsequent generations” (476). I read Brandt’s essay as a study of anti-literacy narratives which trace the cultural dissociation’s of reading and writing (i.e. historically reading is privileged and writing is feared). And in this study I respond to her call to broaden the scope of research to “understand school-based writing in terms of larger cultural, historical, and economic currents” and in order to understand better “what is compelling literacy as it is lived” (477).

Linda Brodkey’s essay, “*Writing on The Bias*” published in *College English* (1994), is a great example of an embodied literacy narrative. It is a transgressive narrative in its own right because Brodkey has “broken with tradition” by choosing not to cite and reference a host of outside authorities in order “to document the experience of being [her] own informant (527). Brodkey performs auto-ethnography, describing her ability to cross borders of “class” to achieve a status-giving literacy.

Writing an embodied literacy history is a political act in the sense that Brodkey becomes conscious of the ways her academic life have pushed her to dis-embodiment (in the aims of achieving objective knowledge of a kind of pure

scholarship). She writes: "I somehow imagined that as a professor I could turn myself inside out like a reversible garment and cloak my female body in what I believed (via courses and grades) to be my genderless and classless mind" (545). She realizes that there is a common effort "...in the world of English professors....[that] such mundane matters as the labor of literary production—the work of writing, placing, selecting, editing, printing, marketing, and distributing books—were thought to be distasteful, akin to asking the host how much the caviar cost" (534)⁷. Brodkey leads me to the realization that another great source of student resistance to reading and writing is an outright refusal to make this kind of split between the life of the mind and the life of the body. Brodkey's text calls attention to the damage done to the self when a student tries to eclipse her body in an effort to pursue intellectual work.

In 1991 Lester William Knotts delivered a paper entitled "*Personal Literacy Experience*" in which he addresses what he calls the naïve belief that literacy in and of itself will be liberating. Knotts describes the differences between "functional" literacy (seen in the current call for "standards") whose supporters believe that literacy is a neutral skill, simply, the ability to think rationally, critically and logically and the "ideological" model of literacy. Proponents of functional literacy view literacy as divorced from other social processes, while

⁷ Patricia Sullivan writes of these same phenomenon in her essay, "*Passing: A Family Dissemblance*" when she says that studying philosophy allowed her to "disappear into the intellectual work at hand" and her professors, in her opinion, "valued and honored that work, the labor itself and not (at least never expressly) the laborer."

the “ideological” model regards reading and writing as intensely social practices “embedded in cultural and economic systems.”⁸ He quotes Brian Street who argues against “. . . . the autonomous (universal and neutral) model of literacy....in order to more fully assess the problems with conclusions drawn from studies in which literacy is treated as autonomous, researchers must study the structural, political and ideological features of the society in question” (?).⁹ He points to the politics involved in literacy by drawing from his own experience and the experiences of his parents growing up in Sugarland, Texas. He explains that even at a young age his mother knew that literacy was status-giving and, later, he talks about the problems that arise from being proficient in two dialects: Southern Black Texan and a Northern White Wisconsinite dialect. He describes straddling the two spheres uncomfortably and how “clinging” to a formal style of academic speaking began to have a price because he was left out of certain peer groups (8). Finally, Knotts concludes,

I place a high value on the preservation of culture, and thus the cost is significant. What is at stake here is who I am, and who my children will be. I placed a great deal of faith in the words and experiences of my parents that the literacies they encouraged me to use were best for me. They could not have realized the degree of

⁸ Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum, 1970. “[Freire] provides a rich rationale to support those who argue that literacy ought not be treated as merely an instrumental ‘skill,’ a mechanical activity acquired as a useful tool in the mastery of more significant and substantive subjects. For Freire, to learn to read and write is to learn to name the world, and in this naming is a program for understanding the conditions of our experience and, most important, for acting in and on them” (Berlin 97).

⁹ See Berlin, James. *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures: Refiguring College English Studies*. New York: NCTE, 1996. Berlin understands that language is a social construction...always prior to individuals, “always already in place as it works to form consciousness, to shape individuals” and he imagines a curriculum that will allow for a democratic classroom that acknowledges difference.

social ostracism I would experience due to the academic literacy and how my sense of belonging is suspended at times between black and white culture. (10)

His work anticipates one of the featured sessions at this year's 4C's, "*The Future of College Composition: Impacts of Alternative Discourses on Standard English*" — featuring Pat Bizzell (who explored the impact of alternative discourses on academic writing), Peter Elbow (who argued we need to make writing legitimate in all vernaculars), and Jacqueline Jones-Royster (who studied the implications of including a wider range of discourses and how they may affect a writer's knowledge-making ability and sense of authority and agency).

"*Reading Literacy Narratives*" by Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen (1992) looks more globally at issues involved in the politics of language acquisition by looking closely at Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, as an example of a literacy narrative which raises a lot of the key questions,

questions about the nature of literacy education, about whether literacy can be acquired without institutional training, about the relationship between literacy and socialization, employment, and mobility, about the continuities and tensions between speech and writing...about the role of gender in the acquisition of schooled language. (513)

Eldred and Mortensen raise a lot of the questions Lester Knotts raises in his autobiographical thesis:

- What happens if speaking a new language means cultural displacement?
- What happens if speaking a new language means losing the self?

- What happens when literacy is too narrowly defined as mere 'skills'?
- What if education does not necessarily mean advancement?
- And what if more education does not necessarily mean better lives?

(515).

Eldred and Mortensen pick up the literacy debate where Knotts left off and more clearly delineate the divided parties. Their article is divided in useful ways: first, they look at what they call **"Literacy Myths,"**; second, **"Literacy: Empowering or Co-Opting,"** third, **"Shaw and the Language of Progress,"** fourth, **"Literacy and Region,"** and, finally, the **"Romance of Literacy."** They view the Shaw himself as an intriguing (embodied) site where all the competing values and views of literacy get played out:

By reading *Pygmalion* as a literacy narrative, we can acknowledge and engage in the central theme of the play: *the place that society and language hold in schooling....* Using this play we can make sense of the Shaw drawn to written language and alphabet reform and the Shaw dedicated to abolishing speech diversity, to regulating dialects...we can illuminate Shaw, the Irish playwright, writing in the shadow of Shakespeare and trying to claim recognition as a literary talent in England; we can construct a Shaw who experienced firsthand the promises and pitfalls of literacy, a Shaw engaged—as we are—in *the science and politics of literacy*. (536)

Finally, it is worth noting that, in the recent past, the field of composition has seen an influx of composition readers devoted to the subject of literacy narratives: *Literacies: Reading, Writing, and Interpretation* (1997) edited by Terence Brunk et. al. and St. Martin's Press, *Writing Lives: Exploring Literacy and Community* (1996), a "process" oriented reader which invites teachers to plan an

entire course around the subject of literacy narratives and what they have to teach us.

The Structure

In **Chapter 1**, *"Inviting Literacy Narratives,"* I introduce both the literacy narrative assignment as well as the series of readings, activities and group work that surround this writing. In **Chapter 2**, *"How I Read the Narratives?"* I introduce a series of theorists and practitioners who have shaped my reading of these narratives. I introduce the range of literacy narrative leads as well as a close reading of a single text to model the potential complexity of these texts. In **Chapter 3**, *"Heroes and Anti-Heroes: The Performance of Teachers in Student Literacy Narratives,"* I study the way students characterize their former teachers in and out of school, looking for clues about what students view as successful and less than successful pedagogical strategies. In **Chapter 4**, *"Rise to Success Narratives,"* I attempt to show how and why some students choose to pattern their narratives after the Horatio Alger story or similar narratives like Franklin's autobiography. In **Chapter 5**, *"Transgressive Narratives,"* I examine both narratives about transgressive acts in school, as well as the transgressive ways students have found to resist the assignment itself. In **Chapter 6**: *Stigma Narratives: Managing A Spoiled Identity*, I use Erving Goffman's study *STIGMA: Notes on The Management of Spoiled Identity* to assist me in reading complex and charged instances in the literacy narratives where students feel they've been negatively marked by an external assessment they've internalized or by a teacher's comment. And finally,

in the **Conclusion: *The Visual, Textual, Tactile Composition Classroom***, I show how students in the course of writing literacy narratives can come to eschew that part of the past “which has been constructed out of a denigrative ideology” and restructure “that part which serves the present” (Rushdie 567). I end by discussing ways to use both art and the genre of creative nonfiction to open up the discussion and practices of writing.

Chapter 1: Inviting Literacy Histories

The fundamental premise of the literacy narrative is that by reading about the lives and ideas of others, we can begin to question and reshape our own lives and ideas.

—Sharon Jean Hamilton, *My Name's Not Susie: A Life Transformed By Literacy*.

IN THE BEGINNING of every writing course, students write literacy narratives — their current version of the story of who they are as writers and readers or even non-writers and non-readers, since so many students work to define themselves both for and against the acts of reading and/or writing. I have found that most students, and most people in general, are not in the practice of looking back on their own shifting uses of and attitudes toward literacy over the course of a lifetime.¹⁰ Since I have them begin with memory as a heuristic device, I attempt to bring in a series of readings and multiple media prompts to jog memory. What follows is a detailed description of the multi-media pedagogical practices I've employed to set-up the classroom to invite the literacy histories.

¹⁰ Charles Bazerman recently gave a lecture on this subject entitled, "*Literacy Over a Lifetime*" at California State University in Stanislaus. He divided his talk into nine categories he sees as occurring chronologically in a lifetime. He said because there is little dialogue between the stages he articulates, our challenge as educators is to see how the stages link up. Here are the categories Bazerman outlines, 1. Situated Literacy/Situated Lives, 2. Before Writing/Emergent Literacy, 3. Writing In The Early School Years, 4. Middle School: Classroom and Community Practices, 5. Secondary Schools, 6. College Writing, 7. Writing in Graduate School & Professional Training, 8. Adult Literacies, 9. Adult Personal Writing.

FILM CLIPS: I begin with small clips from film because it is useful to make connections back and forth between the visual strategies of film producers and the rhetorical choices writers make in producing texts. Students instinctively perk up when I roll out the V.C.R. because for so many of them, this is their medium of choice. They know they are in for “a scene,” or a visually stimulating clip. They’re often astute readers of movie scenes and they’re often more at home with film than written texts.¹¹

I have used the very beginning of Janet Frame’s autobiography, *“Angel At My Table”* – an exchange between a teacher and a student in the classroom. In three rapid cut visual scenes, the director moves from the image of a young girl who steals pocket change from her father, to a classroom scene at school where she sits at a school desk at some in-school recess doling out pieces of chewing gum to classmates who all beg, *“please Jane, just a piece of chewing gum.”* We’re then moved quickly as viewers to the scene of a classroom arranged in tight rows with a stiff faced teacher who realizes that half of her class is blowing bubbles. In an in-class inquisition the teacher deduces that the gum has come from Janet Frame, who says her father gave her the money and who is swiftly punished for lying. The teacher makes her stand at the front of the room with her face inches from the chalkboard while the class plays outside at recess. The clip ends with

¹¹ See Bronwyn T. Williams, *“Tuned In: Television and the Teaching of Writing,”* a study of the complex and often shifting set of practices, preferences and opinions students bring to the act of “watching” T.V.

the bubbly sounds of children playing outdoors while, inside, tears stream down Janet's face.

This scene from *"Angel at my Table"* captures corporal punishment in the classroom. It's a student's painful memory of being "disciplined" by a teacher. I use this clip because the film director captures something quintessential about a common (or even archetypal) "classroom" space and I think this visual example of a classroom setting helps my students to travel back to the distant past to earlier classrooms they've inhabited and perhaps to the kind of "disciplining" they've endured.

There are other films that work well too, because they feature memorable teachers or memorable moments, such as the opening scene from the movie *"A River Runs Through It,"* where the father (a Presbyterian minister) teaches his young son to write. The father reads his papers with a red pencil and refuses to let his son fish until the pages are clearly articulated and immaculately presented. The father is a fly fisherman who believes that "all good things—trout as well eternal salvation—come by grace and grace comes by art and art does not come easy" (Maclean 4). The film clip reveals a poignant literacy moment which captures the discipline involved in learning to write well and to read in order to broaden one's picture of the world.

I've also used a clip from the movie, *"Good Will Hunting,"* which opens with the character Will (played by Matt Damon) scrawling equations on the bathroom mirror because he doesn't have the costly implements for writing on

paper. Will is a young janitor at MIT with an extraordinarily high I.Q. and a penchant for math. He has a number of undiscovered talents that become revealed slowly over the course of the film.

I like to show the clip of the scene in a Harvard bar where an erudite college student tries to use his learning to make Will's friend look bad. Will says the Harvard student pawns off knowledge he has read as original thought and then uses his reading as a weapon. The characters in "*Good Will Hunting*" create instant rapport with students, many of whom come from the Boston area and feel at home with the dialect. The clip also helps students to realize that that they may be smart in ways that may be hidden. The theme of this short clip is (as Scribner would say) is that "literacy is power" and it is critical how one uses what one knows. I pair this clip with the quotation from Epictetus about "*don't just say you have read books. Show that through them you have learned to think better...*"¹² I ask my students to "freewrite" in-class about their own associations. I use these film clips as memory triggers and we go from there.

IN-CLASS FREEWRITING: Peter Elbow's "freewriting" technique is a central activity in my writing classes. Not a class goes by when I don't ask students to "think through writing." There is comfort in this habitual element of the class. There is a great energy involved when twenty-four students write at the same time. Freewriting is a critical step in producing a draft of the literacy

¹² Epictetus. *The Art of Living: The Classic Manual on Virtue, Happiness, and Effectiveness*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSan Francisco, 1994:97.

narrative because when they go home to their word processors they begin with something instead of nothing.

Sometimes, I offer very focused writing prompts, like the poem, "*Berryman*," by W.S. Merwin – a poem filled with advice from a former writing teacher. It is a sharp, quick, loving character sketch. One student will read the poem, slowly, out loud and we'll hear,

Berryman

I will tell you what he told me
in the years just after the war
as we called them
the second world war

don't lose your arrogance yet he said
you can do that when you're older
lose it too soon and you may
merely replace it with vanity

...

it was in the days before the beard
and the drink but he was deep
in tides of his own through which he sailed
chin sideways and head tilted like a tacking sloop

...

he said the great presence
that permitted everything and transmuted it
in poetry was passion
passion was genius and he praised movement and
invention

I had hardly begun to read
I asked how can you be sure
that what you write is really
any good at all and he said you can't

you can't you can never be sure

you die without knowing
whether anything you wrote was any good
if you have to be sure don't write.
(Merwin 270-71)

We discuss the way that the poet Merwin works through metaphor to capture the spirit and the speech of his older teacher then I ask students to then generate a list of all the teachers who come to mind immediately and circle one or two to recreate with words. Hearing a few of these freewrites often generates even more discussion which helps to prime the pump for writing.

Are We What We Read and Write?

LITERACY NARRATIVES are everywhere and one of the more challenging aspects of teaching this particular genre is selecting the readings for "the literacy narrative packet." Last semester I limited myself to six readings. I chose:

- "Well, How Did I Get Here?", Paul Thomas

Paul Thomas is a writing teacher at Soong Sil University and his essay was published in *Composition Studies*. He chooses a segmented, collage-style essay to order the text of his literate life. I select him because he highlights many literacies: a love of film, music, comics, canonical and non-canonical literature.

He begins with a BOLD section, simply listing texts:

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Calvin and Hobbes. The Bear. "The Miller's Tale." John Donne. The paths of glory lead but to the grave. Introduction to Organic Chemistry. Miami Vice. Platoon. Walden. The Rocky Horror Picture Show. Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. "Somethin' happenin' here, what it is ain't exactly clear." Jane Eyre. Jane Austin. The Horror! The Horror!

(Thomas 35)

Thomas then switches to regular font to signal that he's taking a critical step back to reflect on the significance of the books he's just listed. For example,

I had read and seen and heard the entire kiddie canon by the time I was, say, seven. Label me the poster child for mainstream cultural literacy. If I wasn't reading or watching the canon on my own, my mother was right there helping me. Are we what we read and view? Are our most formative years of literacy those first few? If so, I had the complete endoskeleton of American cultural literacy in my head from this early age.

And if this has a few grains of truth, what can one book mean in constructing the fundamental grammar and worldview that are to remain in our heads for the rest of our lives? For instance, how did *The Lorax*, my favorite book as a boy, shape the way I would think? Aside from the typical Seussian lyricism, the whimsical illustrations, *The Lorax* is a book about hopeful environmentalism, radical tree-hugging in the face of the monster of capitalistic progress. From just one seed, a forest. It is a book about being skeptical, a questioning rhetoric that sounds too good to be true. I am still today this contrast between hope and skepticism, and I believe *The Lorax* is there in my head with every text I write. With every Thoreau or Edward Abbey I read, ideas have a place to go. (Thomas 32)

I point out that Thomas doesn't just list the books he's read but also goes an extra step to question how the books have shaped the pattern of thought in his life. He questions his motives and he comes up with this:

I can't help but view my developments in literacy as the result of a very personal, calculated quest. I don't want other people to know things I do not, and then leave me behind or keep me outside. It may be that literacy as our society defines it is motivated by fear, and that the truly courageous are those who have no use for it. I don't know. (Thomas 38)

I like that Thomas ends on a note of not-knowing. He doesn't wrap-up his history but rather leaves the reader with a real question to ponder.

- The "Introduction" to *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, Anne Lamott

Anne Lamott makes me laugh and often she makes students laugh and when there's laughter, generally it signals that people are engaged. Her writing voice is zany and off-the-wall and my students like that. She offers a delightful, playful, "Far Side" version of her childhood. She begins: "I grew up with a mother and father who read every chance they got" and goes on to trace the way these literate behaviors observed from her childhood played a role in shaping her own literate habits:

Throughout my childhood I believed that what I thought was different from what other kids thought about. It was not necessarily more profound, but there was a struggle going on inside me to find some sort of creative or spiritual or aesthetic way of seeing the world and organizing it in my head. I read more than other kids; I luxuriated in books. Books were my refuge. (Lamott xx)

Students begin to see that "literacy is neither a static nor a universal essence," that people are led to both the acts of reading and writing through any number of different motives and goals (Scribner 72).

- "Fearful Paradise," Charles Simic

Charles Simic's *"Fearful Paradise"* examines the discrepancy he feels as an immigrant between the "dream" of America and the "reality" of America. He offers a working-class narrative of going to school at night and living in poverty conditions made more palpable with large color art books he's taken out of the public library. A large part of literacy for him involved "reading" the streets of Chicago,

I liked the anarchy of the city. There were dives and strip-joints a few blocks away from the monumental Art Institute and the ritzy hotels. Chicago was the garage sale of all the contradictions America could contain. Some rusty water-tower on the top of an old warehouse would look as beautiful as some architectural wonder along the lake shore. Every notion one had of aesthetics had to be revised if one were to appreciate the city. My greatest teachers, in both art and literature, were the streets I roamed. (Simic 51)

Simic leads students to create a more expansive, elastic notion of literacy. He leads them to an understanding that "the single most important fact about literacy is that it is a social achievement...an outcome of cultural transmission" (Scribner 72).

- *"Prison Studies,"* Malcolm X

The excerpt from Malcolm X's *Autobiography* (1965) takes place while he's in jail and describes all the fear and shame that accompanies the experience of illiteracy. Malcolm X copies the entire dictionary "down to the punctuation marks." He explains how the world can sometimes open up and expand

exponentially with the slow development of language. In talking directly to the reader, he reveals:

Let me tell you something; from then until I left that prison, in every free moment I had, if I was not reading in the library, I was reading on my bunk. You couldn't have gotten me out of books with a wedge. Between Mr. Muhammad's teachings, my correspondence, my visitors...and my reading of books, months passed without me even thinking about being imprisoned. In fact, up to then, I never had been so truly free in my life..." (Malcolm X 93)

Malcolm X inspires students with his energy and passion, and his textual presence in the room helps us all to see the ways literacy (historically) has been both offered and withheld. *Embodied Narratives* echoes Malcolm X's story in the sense that I am exploring similar autobiographical tropes that emerge in writing a life:

The Autobiography...resembles more general autobiographical models, most notably the spiritual narrative (his documentation of his conversion experience) and the success story of the self-made man. In fact, it's the text's remarkable meshing of so many modes, and so many 'Malcolm's,' that may be its most significant achievement. (*Oxford Companion to African American Literature* 473).

- "The Library Card," Richard Wright,

I ALSO include a short section from Richard Wright's autobiography, *Black Boy* (1945). Wright explores the effects of white supremacist attitudes/actions affect on every facet of his life, including the fact that he is denied the privilege of owning a library card to take books out of the public library. This always seems to strike a chord in students who frequently write

about the experience of owning their first library cards and how this first identification card made them feel like true citizens and “real” people — no longer just kids. Wright writes,

I ran across many words whose meanings I did not know, and either I looked them up in a dictionary or, before I had a chance to do that, encountered the word in a context that made its meaning clear. But what strange world was this...I had once reveled in feeling, had let my crude imagination roam, but the impulse to dream had been slowly beaten out of me by experience. Now it surged up again and I hungered for books, new ways of looking and seeing. (70).

I hope students feel “it is not a matter of believing or disbelieving what [they] read, but of feeling something new, of being affected by something that [makes] the world look different” (Wright 70). I hope the published literacy narratives give them this experience/sensation. I hope the readings act partly as textual memory triggers and partly as prose models offering ways to compose texts.

THE ASSIGNMENT: After setting the assignment up through film and freewriting and a series of readings I give writers this handout:

Writing a Personal Literacy Narrative

(5 pages, typed, with a title)

Instructor: Stephanie Paterson

Come then. What is it to be literate? We have to draw our own maps, trace our own histories, acknowledge our debts and consider ways not taken. Our literacy autobiographies reveal riches and gaps, but these narratives are not tales of solitary journeys. We are always in dialogue with others — those who taught us to read, those for whom we wrote, who lent us books, shaped our preferences, encouraged us, forbade us even.

—Margaret Meek, *On Being Literate*.

This assignment encourages you to study your memories of learning to read and write. This is a type of research paper called “auto-ethnography” where you stand back from your experiences like a distanced observer and comment on how your experiences have shaped your ideas, views, and beliefs about literacy. I am interested in seeing that you can find a form that works for you in telling your history as a developing writer/reader. Paul Thomas employs a very creative, *unusual* and experimental form for his prose writing – see if you can’t find a creative form that will both strengthen and communicate your meaning.

As you begin to write and set in motion the continual process of revising (both in terms of revising your thoughts, as well as revising the words on the page) use the following questions to help you to generate material and to organize your thoughts (although you don’t have to take these prompts-for-writing in chronological order):

- What are your earliest memories of speaking, reading, or writing? Try to recreate scenes from as far back as you can remember (this will vary for different people). *Describe the contexts* in which they occurred.
- Describe individual people and/or communities that have influenced your sense of literacy.
- Describe the books that have been most important to you. Why were they most important? Are they still important? Explain.
- Think of times when you realized you didn’t have the literacy necessary to participate fully. Describe how you felt; describe the actions you took because of these experiences.
- Describe how you became literate (or how you learned to understand the most effective language or behaviors in a particular community).

- Holzer says, “we pay so little attention to the human beings who sit in class, their personal reasons for coming, their difficulties, what blocks them from creating, what makes them flow” (Holzer 5). What are some of the difficulties you face when you approach writing?

Our memories and our histories are often housed in our stories, which we share through different uses of language. In some sense, we are the stories we create and tell; we are the languages we use to understand and express ourselves. Literacy is more than simply reading and writing. To be literate requires that we grasp the complexity of how language functions in communities.

— Excerpt from *Writing Lives: Exploring Literacy and Community*

* * *

WRITING WORKSHOP: This occurs after the first week when students bring their “first drafts” to swap with peer reading partners. I begin the workshop by asking that they write a “*behind the scenes*” commentary on the back of their papers. “This is an opportunity for you to raise questions for readers or to offer information that maybe didn’t make its way into the narratives.”

I am known to type quotations on small scraps of paper, just big enough for students’ to paste in their writing journals. They’re “pep talk” quotations about writing, only slightly bigger than Chinese fortunes. I hand them words from Joan Bolker, author of *A Writer’s Companion*; “*think about this*”:

You will learn to write in order to think, to encourage thought, to tease thought out of chaos or fright. You will write constantly, and continuously, at every stage, to name your topic and to find your way into it. You will learn to write past certainty, past prejudice, through contradiction, and into complexity. You will come to write out of your own self, and, eventually, even though you may be

afraid of what your reader will say, you will learn to write in a way that will allow you to be heard.

—Joan Bolker 1998

They give each other written feedback in “*a fat paragraph*,” or a detailed, specific, and generously written paragraph response. In the writing workshop, they learn there are as many ways to interpret an assignment as there are students. They discover there is no “one right way” to write, but there are ways that convey messages more effectively. They learn that it is easier at times to be critical of others’ texts than it is to learn to be a critical reader of one’s own writing. In the writing workshop I begin to offer them a language for supporting and critiquing others’ words.

LITERACY MOMENTS ILLUSTRATED

Learning stamps you with its moments. Childhood’s learning is made up of moments. It isn’t steady. It’s a pulse.

—Eudora Welty, *One Writer’s Beginnings*

After creating first drafts of literacy narratives, students focus on a “turning point” moment in their narrative and, to put a spin on more traditional writing workshops, I ask them to attempt to depict a portion of their narrative *visually*. Inspired by John Dewey, in *Art as Experience* as well as Howard Gardner’s theories of multiple intelligences, I create this space for students to render a portion of their narrative artistically knowing that many think-in-

images.¹³ What is valuable about these literacy narrative moments – both verbal and visual – are that “interests and biases” that are “hidden in the normal course of living stand revealed for inspection” (Graham 123).

Something happens to the classroom. The energy changes. The atmosphere becomes concentrated. I watch as students rifle through old magazines looking for images in *Rolling Stone* and *Time* and *Skiing* that may stand in and for lived moments of their literate history. They tend to work quietly. Some students are more text-bound, pulling out phrases and words. Some students simply cut out images: landscapes, faces, material objects – all images with metaphorical possibility. They use their imaginations to make something new out of an old history. I view this as a revision workshop – a way to re-see their literate history and themselves as writers. The images prompt students to think figuratively and to think in new ways. Charles Simic writes,

The experience of being eludes language. We need imagination because ...It's only through the use of analogy, seeing connections in disparate things, that I can hope to convey the fullness of the original moment.

Analogy is a form of translation. (Simic 39)

I'll introduce four illustrated “turning point” moments directly quoting the embodied voices of students.

¹³Joan A. Mullen is a kindred spirit in this regard, writing about the ways she has found to help students “to draw upon images that make visible their conception of an idea” in her essay, “Beyond Visualizing a Community of Learners” in *ARTiculating: Teaching Writing in a Visual World*. New Hampshire: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1998: (116).

- **Kelly (See Plate #1)**

She writes,

This [collage] represents my sophomore year of high school, a major turning point in my literacy narrative because I had to change my style of writing. I had to change it to be “correct” for my teacher. She often criticized our work calling it “**nauseating**,” [which is why she includes] the cartoon from *The New Yorker* on the bottom. My writing was **redefined** by this teacher’s standards, and I had no say in it. If I wanted a decent grade, I had to write the way *She* wanted. We could **never give lip** about how we felt about our writing. We had to **put our dreams away**, and write what she wanted to hear about. During this year, I wondered could we **ever try to flunk a bad teacher**? I learned a valuable lesson this year, and that is always **trust the original**. My best writing is when I write for myself, in my own style.

Plate #1

Put Your Dreams Away

Ever Try to Flunk a Bad Teacher?

contrast

never
give lip

Nothing Short of Incredible.



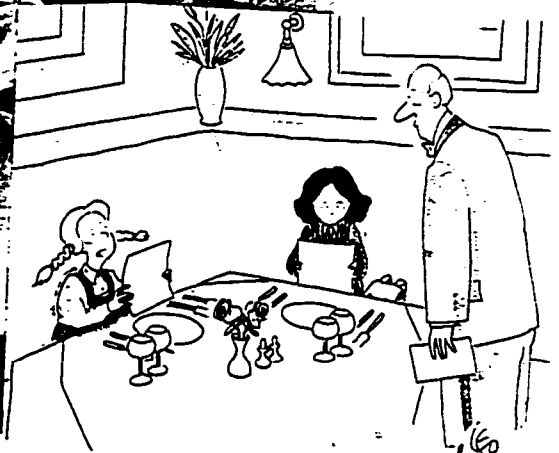
Perfect



Trust the Original

simple

Redefined



"What's not disgusting?"

Plate #1 (Kelly)

- Jessica (See Plate #2)

She writes,

Because I was reading before anyone else in my kindergarten class, my teacher used to make me sit in front of the class and read to them. I hated it! My face would burn, my hands would shake—I hated being put in the spotlight. The red, yellow, and orange colors I used for the background symbolize the hot feeling I would get. My face and ears would turn bright red as I was reading...*Each Peach, Pear, Plum* was a book I read so many times I still remember the words after all these years.

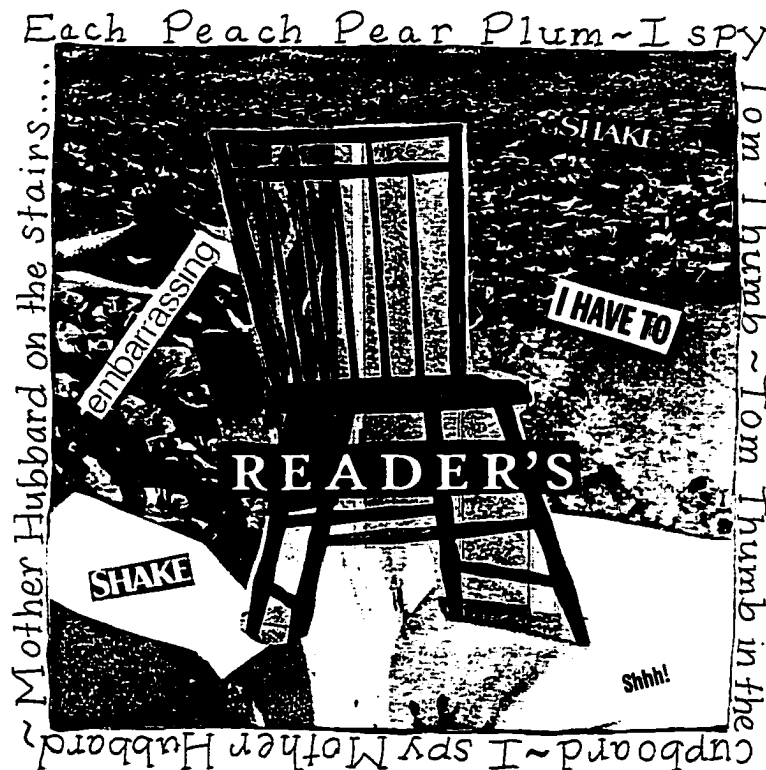


Plate #2 (Jessica)

- Chris (See Plate #3)

She writes,

This [collage] describes my struggle of being trapped in a programmed way of writing to finally being able to write for myself. In the twelfth grade my teacher taught in a different way than I had ever experienced before prior to that year. He had us do plays, write sonnets, free write, and much more.

Mr. Dorethy was a teacher who inspired his students to write differently, try new styles. All the other teachers I had had a specific way they wanted us to write and we were not allowed to be creative. So we all learned their style so we could get the A.

For me it was a huge hurdle I had to jump over in order to write creatively and not for the teacher. The computer with the man stuck in it symbolizes the programmed way of writing and thinking I was taught throughout my younger years of schooling. The words surrounding it symbolize the feelings I felt at the time, like a prisoner to one style of writing. I would always wonder and worry, 'what if I fail?'

Then the change happened. I fought (the two people fighting) for my own voice and with the help of my teacher (the little guy) I came to a new awakening. I had a heart for writing and reading. I had found the balance and built a new bridge (the

rainbow) and won the battle. I had been set free to write the way I
deemed worthy.



Plate #3 (Chris)

- **Maura (See Plate #4)**

The turning point in my writing came in my junior year of high school. My friend Gray, who was a senior at the time, felt like he was living in Hell and that death was his only option. So, on New Year's day he mixed together a deadly combination of Prozac and alcohol, and committed suicide to escape the beating life was giving to him. This is what the center panel is supposed to signify.

All around me people went on living happily, while I was alone in a sea of grief. This is shown in the top left corner. To give my life some focus I combined my love of history, castles, and hauntings and wrote my first short story ever. It was about a ghost, in the middle ages, who haunted the castle where she'd spent her life being abused. The castle is shown in the top right corner.

Eventually, my friends and I formed a circle of support, which helped me share the stories that I was now able to write. This is shown with Stonehenge with light just starting to break through.



Plate #4 (Maura)

Ways Of Reading

Without proprioception, without a corporeal way to address the tragedies and victories that play out in our classrooms, our lives, and our worlds, we cannot change or celebrate our concrete existence.

— Kristie S. Fleckenstein, *“Writing Bodies: Somatic Mind in Composition Studies.”*

I am struck by the physicality of bodies in the throes of schooling: one teacher describes “nausea” in response to a certain kind of text, one student makes a large hard-back, black chair the center of her visual to signal that when she thinks of reading she thinks of it as occurring in a stiff chair in the front of a room with all eyes watching her read aloud. Another student uses a T’ai Chi scene of battle to represent the struggle she has had to develop the kind of subjectivity as a writer that allows her to feel her personality is intact and not diminished by what she experiences as “more programmatic ways of writing.” Chris uses the image of a computer to metaphorically capture the fact that she feels “programmed” to write using about the same creativity as a computer hard drive’s mechanical ability for data recall. And finally, Maura’s grief narrative focuses on the loss of body—a friend’s suicide and Maura’s accompanying physical grief, as well as her sense of redemption in the act of forming a group with other writers who provide an encouraging and supportive audience for her written words.

It is possible to see recurrent themes emerge: these writers convey scenes of memories of former teachers, of experiencing bodily discomfort. They use

color to render emotions of fear, insecurity, shame. There are repetitions of words like “dreams” juxtaposed with verb phrases like “have to,” and/or words like, “prisoner,” “worry,” or “fail.” There are images of battle to communicate the division experienced between a teacher’s vision of “correct” writing and students’ notion of writing as embodying creative style. Both Kelly and Chris’s visual collages relate to a study done by Russel K. Durst in *Collision Course: Conflict Negotiation, and Learning in College Composition* (1999) in which Durst examines the opposing agendas of students and teachers in college level composition courses. From the visuals we learn that different conceptions of the look and purpose of writing has been a site for conflict throughout the students’ education.

I HAVE a strong visual memory and sometimes when I’m teaching or preparing for a class I’ll picture one student’s visual collage. I’ll remember how this or that activity made him/her feel shame. I’ll remember the joy the student felt in being allowed to experiment with language. I’ll remember the visual way she found to express the hope they gained from having a teacher who believed in him/her. I have been subtly tutored in the fine art of teaching from eliciting these visual collages of literacy moments. They offer a wealth of clues about what has “worked” and what has not in former literacy instruction. My hope is that by creating a protected space and time within my classroom to create these visual collages, writers will imaginatively engage in the stories they’ve lived and

narrated. I offer this as a creative form of revision, allowing students to enter into a “first draft” and to imagine ways to expand, develop and revise meanings that are still unexplored, namely, a healthy resistance to programmatic ways of writing, the awareness of the necessity for community-in-writing, and an awareness and perhaps, necessary curiosity about shame-in-relation-to-success and where that may come from. I hope that they start to feel that they belong to a community of other writers who also feel a host of fears about the acts of reading and/or writing as well as how the subject of English has been experienced by them in the past. I hope they start to feel a trust in me as their teacher, eager to hear their story of past literate experiences. I begin with autobiography, agreeing with Habermas that “the interpretation of self-formative processes, works as a method to promote new action” (Atwell-Vasey 9). Like Madeleine Grumet, I use autobiography “to disclose the student’s understanding of education” and I try to help them to “scan [their] narrative for a point of view, for a logic of action, a theory of cognition, for the detail that suggests motives hardly whispered in the text” (80).

In **Chapter 2: A Rationale For Why and How To Read Literacy Histories** I proceed with an interdisciplinary reading of Robert Graham in *Reading and Writing the Self: Autobiography in Education and the Curriculum* (1991), Robert E. Brooke, *Writing Sense of Self* (1991), Patricia Hampl in “Memory and Imagination,” and Robert Coles, *The Call of Stories*—to help me to theorize about how I read the “protean, multifacted, and slippery genre” of literacy histories (Graham 156).

Chapter 2 : A Rationale For *Why* and *How* to Read the Literacy Histories

...first to render one's educational experience...into words...The second is to use one's critical faculties to understand what principles and patterns have been operative in one's educational life, hence achieving a more profound understanding of one's educational experience, as well as illuminating parts of the inner world and deepening one's self-understanding generally. The third task is to analyze other's experience to reveal what I call basic educational structures or processes that cross biographical lines.

— Robert J. Graham, *Reading and Writing the Self*

WHILE assigning literacy histories seems to be part of the shared lore of many educational settings, *how* to read them doesn't seem to be included in this same shared lore. The readings go on privately in offices and writing conferences and late at night with mugs of coffee. Some use the literacy narratives as a writing sample or a diagnostic tool to gauge students various writing abilities and/or handicaps, noticing things like: *This student doesn't write using complete sentences. This one avoids paragraph thinking. Here there seems to be an issue with spelling.* Others read this particular writing as a way to get a sense of the student's larger history including what attitudes and assumptions they bring to the acts of reading and writing.

For me, although it's useful to notice certain patterns of error to bring up later in a writing conference, literacy narratives are outside of the realm of a corrective type of evaluation. Literacy narratives, like other autobiographical forms of writing, are a potentially risky genre. Because I want to encourage a development in thoughts and ideas and early, sometimes fragile, feeling, I establish a trust by viewing these narratives as the beginning of a semester-long conversation we will have about reading and writing.

Ways of Reading

If fiction requires of its readers the willing suspension of disbelief, what does a literacy narrative require?

—Sharon Jean Hamilton, *My Name Is Not Susie: A Life Transformed By Literacy*

Essentially I'm interested in discovering what sort of identity a student assumes in relation to the acts of reading and writing. What I'll explore in the next four chapters are four of the more common subject positions I see represented over and over again: the student as a rise-to-"success" story, the writer/reader as transgressive, and the student as stigmatized, somehow finding ways to manage what Erving Goffman calls "a spoiled identity." I do isolate these patterns of narration in order to see better the place, purpose and/or effects of certain writerly subjectivities on the life of the student, however, the point is that these subject positions (especially potentially negative positions, like the stigmatized self) are not a life sentence. Students can be led to see that bodies are

not static, they can construct a sense of subjectivity that is shape-shifting and fluid and capable of acting in a wide range of settings.

Body Memory

'What is remembered in the body,' Elaine Scarry writes, 'is well remembered' (109). I think of the bodies in my classroom, some strutting into class, staking out their space and birthright; others finding a way to become the self scripted for them over the decades; and still others there by a miracle they know can be undone at any moment but there nonetheless, laying tentative stake to a claim that will never be safely theirs, that they can never own, that may still be yanked away whatever they do, however good they are.

*—Patricia Sullivan, *Passing: A Family Dissemblance**

WHAT becomes immediately apparent in these histories is the presence of physical bodies, not bodies as signifiers or bodies as discourse but concrete bodies who in their flesh and blood form draw attention to the dialectic between materiality and language. This fact offers us clues in terms of how to read. We're wise to read with what Kirstie S. Fleckenstein calls "somatic mind" that is reading as "*a being-in-a-material-place*," which she argues "offers the hope of transforming lives, cultures, and meanings" (286).

I'll briefly map out a few of the voices who have helped me to better read with "somatic mind" as "*a being-in-a-material place*" — these authors include the compositionist Robert E. Brooke, *Writing and Sense of Self*, the memoir writer, Patricia Hampl, in much anthologized essay, "*Memory and Imagination*", and the psychiatrist Robert Coles, in *The Call of Stories*.

The Self Contains Multitudes

The self, if it is healthy, does not divide but contains its multitudes, its contradictions within easy grasp and range.

—Patricia Hampl, *"The Mayflower Moment"*

From Brooke, in *Writing and Sense of Self: Identity Negotiation in Writing Workshops* (1991), I learn that we can gain a lot as writing teachers from taking an "identity negotiations" perspective, which means believing that

- 1) learning is dependent on identity negotiations, on individuals' attempts to work out their social place in and beyond the classroom;
- 2) learning to write depends on the identification and exploration of writers' roles for the self, roles which need to be broader than the limited examinee-to-examiner traditional school roles. (Brooke 140)

In the same way Robert E. Brooke discusses the ways he uses the writing workshop setting as a place for student to experiment with trying on new writerly roles, I use the literacy narrative writing as a site to reflect and examine and question the types of writerly roles that have both been assigned to students and/or appropriated by students.

Memory and Imagination

Memory is not just commemoration; it is ethical power. Beyond this, its purpose is not simply to edify, nor even to warn, important though that function is. Memory's fundamental instinct is to formulate. That is, to make a past which is not only accurate (that would be a hopeless task, a naïve and misguided enterprise) but imaginatively accurate, as a work of art is.

—Hampl “Czeslaw Milosz and Memory”

Patricia Hampl in her essay “Memory and Imagination” in *I Could Tell You Stories* (1999) clues me in to what to expect when she says that memoirs (and literacy narratives can be considered a particular form of memoir) are characterized by “broken and incomplete images, half-recollected fragments, all the mass (and mess) of detail” (33). If a piece of writing were to end there, in the “mass and mess of detail” there would be any number of frustrated writing teachers left feeling ineffectual. But Hampl says, the writer must go back and mine the images for their significance. She says, “stalking the relationship, seeking the congruence between stored image and hidden emotion—that’s the real job of memoir” (30). She shows me how to find ways to help students to see that the details of their narratives are not “allowed to lounge,” but the concrete details of a life must do work—“in our details and broken, obscured images,” we will find “the language of symbol” (31).

Their Story

The people who come to see us bring us their stories.
They hope they tell them well enough so that we
understand the truth of their lives. They hope we
know how to interpret their stories correctly. We have
to remember that what we hear is *their story*.

—Robert Coles, *The Call of Stories*

I attempt to read the way the doctor Robert Coles listens to his patients as they describe their various life situations. In *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the*

Moral Imagination, Coles talks about an exchange he has with a psychiatrist, Dr. Ludwig, a dialogue which stays with him for three decades. Dr. Ludwig

...reminded me that psychiatrists often hover over their patients, intent on getting a fix on them: make a diagnosis; ascertain what 'factors' or 'variables' have been at work; decide upon a 'therapeutic agenda.' (7)

I, too am "intent" on discovering a little about the way each student "ticks," believing this will better help me to shape and prepare "lessons" that will reach the individual students in my classroom, versus teaching to a picture of the stereotypical classroom of generic students in my head.

With this in mind, my reading of literacy narratives has been fueled by a few simple questions: how does each student choose to shape the literacy narrative? If they borrow from conventional narrative structures, what conventions seem available and accessible to them to help them to structure their story?

Literacy Leads

I was fierce in my quest for identity—I needed a life to enter, a face to look like, a story to be in, so I made new stories each day. How does the idea of "story" first present itself in the life of a child? At what point does one's original narrative begin?

—Jan Beatty, *"Ghost Story"*

The first drafts of literacy narratives begin with many varied leads, reflecting a wide range of "performances of self" in relation to literacy. There exist a wide range of tones, registers and "voices."

Tyler begins his literacy narrative, “My first fear of reading came to me when I was in kindergarten.” Another literacy narrative begins with a book recollection, “The first story I truly loved was *Cinderella*” (Alexa). Some are marked by flowery prose styles, “When remembering back to my early days of reading and writing colorful flashes of past experiences gracefully dance through my mind.” (Clare) Some work as “literacy as deception” narratives – where students tell stories of duping others eyes with their professed literate abilities, as Lisa describes when she writes,

Big brown bear, blue bull, beautiful baboon...” I recited all of this proudly to my grandfather from Dr. Seuss’s entire *B Book*. He really thought I was reading too. I had memorized the entire book since my mother read it to me so often, and I knew exactly where to turn the pages. I had him fooled. Not bad for a two-year old.

Of course my grandfather had thought I would turn out to be brilliant. I had done that with a few other books, too, so he went around telling everyone that he met his granddaughter, who was only two, and she could read. He couldn’t have been farther from the truth. I had an awful time learning how to read in elementary school.

Some literacy narratives are marked by a mythical, lofty, elevated tone, “The history of my literacy started with the first word I spoke, which was “Katie” (his pet’s name). This same student goes on to tell a story about being noticed as off-the-charts precocious,

My mother tells the story of a physical I had with my doctor when I was nine months old. Although I have no memory of that day, it is probably one of my favorite stor[ies] about my childhood. I was sitting on my mother’s lap and the Doctor was asking my mother some questions about my health, behavior, and development. He asked if I had started to say any words and before she could reply I

gave him an answer. I asked him, "Is that your stethoscope over there?" At this my doctor's prominent jaw descended. That would not be the last time in my life that I would draw attention to myself through my literacy. (Rock)

Narratives like Rock's beg the question of how true are these truthful non-fictional narratives? Some begin philosophically with a question, "What is literacy?" (Lucy). And she begins,

To discover my history of literacy I had to go deep inside of myself to find what made me the person I am. I had to find the reason I am unconsciously drawn to words. Why do I need to satisfy my existence through others written thoughts? This is a path I have never traveled. I rarely look to the past to figure out who I am and where I have come from, although this is the most obvious place to look.

Some begin wistfully with lost dreams, the voice of the cold realist,

I remember a time when I was younger and wanted to become a writer. I couldn't have been more than thirteen years old and I thought that my poetry had some sort of insightful flow and grace. Not until many years later, when the competition in school got tougher, did I realize that I was simply fooling myself. I found out that I wasn't a literary genius, I had thought I was, and that other kids could write, too. I abandoned the idea.

Some memories begin with just the hint of a feeling to describe the complex motives that fueled early literacy, like John's narrative, as he writes,

I can't exactly remember my earliest recollection of reading. I do remember my feelings when I would read, and the reason that I would read. I remember trying to read for praise. I remember starting long novels to impress my parents and to hear them say, *'Wow! I'm impressed.'* I got a great feeling of satisfaction from that praise, and would often seek it. Only reading for approval resulted in many unfinished books; cause you see, I am not really the book type.

Some begin in the voice of the anthropologist that studies the culture around her, taking in the cultural rituals and ritualistic behavior,

Before I even understood what reading really was, I saw the effect books had on the people around me. The mysterious flat, square objects seemed to be scattered throughout my life. I saw them on the night stand next to my mother's bed, on the shelves in my father's office, in the bathroom of our house, in my aunt's beach bag in the summer, and on my grandparents boat. These magical objects made people happy and made them think. I used to watch my aunt reading the books as I played on the beach in front of my grandparents house. She looked lost in them. I remember how my mother and my aunts would trade books with each... almost like they were treasured baseball cards. I watched my father as he read stories to my sisters and I. He was getting so much from the pages of the book...At the time I was making these observations, I had no idea what a great effect learning to read would have on my life.
(Willa)

Others begin with gratitude, "I feel that I have been lucky and fortunate to have had parents who exposed me to reading at a very young age" (Jeremy). And another will begin, "For as long as I can remember, books have been available to the curious minds of people in my household" and another, humorously, "Although I hate to admit, reading hasn't played as much a role in my life as it has in the lives of Oprah Winfrey and Stephanie Paterson, I do believe it has contributed to the person I am today. Unlike the latter two I wasn't born with a book in hand...." (Jared). There are as many potential "leads" and variations of "ways in" as there are students in my classroom. And each narrative seems to begin with a marked tone that can offer "clues" about individual students attitudes and assumptions, learned and inherited, surrounding "literacy" as a subject.

A Case Study

...bodies as sites of and participants in meaning-making have been elided. In sacrificing bodies to some illusion of either transcendent truth or culturally constituted textuality, we cut ourselves adrift from any organic anchoring in the material reality of flesh.

—Kirstie Fleckenstein, "*Somatic Mind*"

Eldred and Mortensen explain that literacy narratives, "like other forms of narrative representation...are rarely isolated, uncomplicated, unaffected by other modes or logics. To read for literacy narratives thus entails studying the ways they interact or compete with other generic forms" (Eldred 530). Literacy narratives are polyphonic texts, composed in voices that will shift in tone and register depending on the message and Eldred and Mortensen comment on this fact when they write,

In the study of narrative, critics have moved from a formalist urge to see texts as examples of certain generic classifications (detective fiction) and have searched for ways in which the text, particularly the novel or fiction, combines forms to create heterglossia—the combination of characters, perspectives, logics, and genres, all jockeying for position in the field of the polymorphic text." (Eldred and Mortensen 530)

To offer an example, Tyler writes a literacy narrative that starts off a little in the tradition of gothic horror except the horror stems from his "fear of reading." A few paragraphs later, the tone shifts to that of the conventional "romance" when he writes, "It was in the fourth grade that I really and honestly fell in love with a book...." He introduces *There's a Boy in The Girl's Bathroom* the book that marks a

real turning point in his literate history, as his first memory of reading a book without pictures and his first memory of being able “to enjoy a novel.” Even the notion of including “the turn” as Tom Newkirk has argued in *The Performance of Self in Student Writing* is a conventional move that is learned and signals the writer is dramatizing thought “by showing...someone open to the potentially transforming effects of a life lived sensitively encountered” (Newkirk 13). When Tyler gets to this “turn” of his literacy narrative, his prose shifts suddenly to a kind of breathless prose, as though he can’t narrate the story of this memory quickly enough. He stops thinking in sentences and he writes,

It was in the fourth grade that I really and honestly fell in love with a book, it was called *There’s a boy in the girl’s bathroom* it was and still is the only book that has made me cry. It is probably because it was the first real book I read and I could not predict the ending approaching or how it would turn out. The story had four major characters (I have forgotten their names). The main character was the new boy at school and he had a rough time making friends so he was cast out as being different with another boy that was just a little rough around the edges, they produce a makeshift friendship which bloomed with the help of one special new teacher. To make matters worse the new boy had a crush on one of the little cute girls in his class and since he was new at the school he accidentally ran into the girl’s bathroom. Later on the cute girl went into the boys room when she knew he was in there to make him feel better, they eventually went on to have a pre-teen affair. But the climax of the story came when the teacher, who taught the new boy how to be accepted and the outcast to be Welcomed and the girl not to be afraid anymore, had to leave and stop teaching. The new boy tried and tried to see her one last time before she left but when he got there she was gone. This was the first unhappy ending that I can remember ever experiencing and it snapped me in half like a twig and I began to bawl a rainstorm of tears. At the end of the novel the boy mailed the most important treasure he ever owned, a porcelain bunny rabbit he had since birth with one broken ear to her in the mail signifying how important she was in his life.

In this brief excerpt from Tyler's literacy narrative it is possible to see what Eldred and Mortensen mean when they talk about *heteroglossia* — the combination of characters, perspectives, logics, and genres, all jockeying for position in the field of the polymorphic text" (530). First there are the characters Tyler identifies with enough so that when he gets to the end of the book he feels the loss strongly enough to cry. There are power structures being exposed: the structure of power among peers in school, and educational structures of power — one wonders why a teacher who affects so much positive change has "had to leave and stop teaching."

There are also "logics" being developed as well, as the writer goes along narrating the story of his literate history. He studies the logic of how he works as a reader and writer at different stages of his development. He creates theories to support his readings, like his fear of reading he explains in this way,

I have almost a fear of starting a novel, I am no where close to the end and I usually do not know or understand what is going on. For me it is the worst part of the book the beginning it is just a bunch of strangers, not a bunch of friends. A shyness toward books I guess. I have always been shy and there is a possibility that it may overflow into books as well, not that it is intimidation just habit. The books I have liked usually start off one on one with the reader, less intimidating of a start. They must first make me comfortable with the person I am reading about, then I can live along with them.

He argues that how he reads is intimately connected to a deep aspect of character, a long-term feeling of shyness which he brings to the act of reading.

He argues that as a reader he requires a sense of rapport with a writer established for him by the sound of a speaking voice on the page. And about his ability as a writer he tells this story,

I learned in high school that I could write a real good essay if I needed to, I finally was able to put down my thoughts on paper in a clear manner. But the circumstances under which it happened could be an essay itself. I was assigned to do a three page essay on a family pet, at the time I had myself a cat that I had had for eight years. So I was connected to this cat very well and writing a three page essay was simple and it was a fairly good essay, so I handed it in and got it back so I could do the final draft due the following day. That same day I was poking around near our shed when I saw my cat lying down as if it were sleeping but it wasn't sleeping she was dead, and I had to make myself revise my pet essay the day my cat died. You never appreciate something until it is gone, and since my cat was so freshly gone I was able to re-write my pet essay so it was five times better than it had been before. My teacher came up to me after reading it and told me how good it was and then he went around telling all kinds of other people how good of an essay it was, maybe he was just trying to ease my pain but I don't think so. I finally found out how to tap into the same emotion I found when I wrote this essay so every time I need to write something real I find myself tapping into these same feelings I found.

Again, he continues to expand on an earlier logic in using the word "connection." He needs to feel a sense of connection with a writer established by the "voice" of the narrator which "must make" him "comfortable." And he explains that "writing a three page essay was simple" because he was "connected" to his cat "very well." Tyler extrapolates from this recalled scene that "I finally found out how to tap into the same emotion I found when I wrote this essay." And,

I learned later from some of my plays I had done that these feelings can be artificially used for works of fiction as well as non-fiction. In writing stories I became the character I was writing about, I was feeling what he felt at the time I was writing it. And this skill improved my non-fiction as well because I learned that if I lived the thing I was writing about I wrote a better essay.

In the next four chapters, **“Heroes and Anti-Heroes,” “Rise To Success Narratives,” “Transgressive Narratives,”** and **“Stigma Narratives”** I attempt to read to discover what these “combinations of characters, perspectives, logics, and genres, all jockeying for position in the field of the polymorphic text” can teach us about lessons learned about writing as well as the potential range of subjectivities available to student writers.

Chapter 3 Heroes and Anti-Heroes: Teachers Embodied in Student Literacy Histories

[I see] Mrs. Newman, my seventh-grade English teacher, retired now for over thirty years. I see her just as she was in 1960, monolithic, restless, a battleship captain who plunged us through the icy seas of grammar, demanding our perfect behavior with nouns and verbs, and especially adverbs. Every day we raced to the board to diagram sentences, to pit our resources against one another. Every day, waiting for her command, I felt a constriction in my throat, an impulse to scream.

—Patricia Foster, *"The Way Smart People Do"*

THE VISCERAL memory and image of a teacher, like the one above, abound in the popular imagination. If you look at Hollywood movie representations of teachers, there are those who are idealistic and respond to a sense of call and there are roles ranging from authoritarian, to anti-authoritarian, to seductive and, worse, clueless.¹⁴

English teachers seem especially targeted *en masse* as a group who embody a host of negative perceptions in the cultural imagination. As Lynn Z. Bloom writes,

I used to go to parties in hopes of meeting new people, but now I live in a small town and everyone knows I'm an English teacher. Therefore, I lack, shall we say, *je ne sais quoi*. No one ever says, "How wonderful that you are introducing my children to the discourse community to which they aspire." No one ever says, "I

¹⁴ See Bauer, Dale M. "Indecent Proposals: Teachers in the Movies" in *College English*, Vol. 60, No. 3, March 1998: 301-317. She argues that "if culture didn't project so much onto English professors, they wouldn't have to be so systematically trivialized and parodied, on the one hand, or revered and sentimentalized, on the other" (302-3).

myself always looked forward to those sessions on critical thinking." No one ever says, "I was empowered by the opportunities for crossing boundaries." Or, "emerging from my gender stereotype." Or, "the chance to revise." Or, "finding my own voice." Or, "inventing my persona of choice." Instead they say, "I guess I'd better watch my grammar." A friend, also an English teacher, always tells strangers she's a nurse. ("Freshman Comp. As a Middle-Class Enterprise" 654-55)

Patricia Sullivan tells a similar story of entering a crowded elevator full of English teachers at a national convention at a hotel which simultaneously hosted NCAA basketball players in tournament time. When one of the basketball players in the elevator discovers she is an English teacher, he says, "My God, you're my worst nightmare" (Sullivan, *"Ethnography and the Problem of the 'Other'"* 107). In the public's perception, the role and function of English teachers are often limited and static. English teachers occupy the same orb as dentists in terms of perceived threat.

In literacy histories, students' respond to Meek's more expansive call to look at "*those who taught us to read, those for whom we wrote, who lent us books, shaped our preferences, encouraged us, forbade us even...*" and here I turn to a series of student representations of teachers to argue that (often) when students write of former teachers they're offering up a challenge of sorts. Their histories start to read like *cautionary* tales. Teachers are either "heroes" who inspired the student (in which case, the challenge is to live up to the student expectation) or the teacher is an anti-hero who caused pain (in which case, the challenge is to not cause similar damage in terms of the student's sense of self). They're a challenge

to question our pedagogical practices. I also believe these representations of teachers can help us to achieve an “externalized view of ourselves” which may (although certainly not always) help us to “observe and repair [the] negative dynamics of communication...” that occur in any classroom (Bazerman 26).

In *The Performance of Self in Student Writing* Tom Newkirk looks at the testimonial and the eulogy as two “deliberately uncomplicated forms of writing,” often found in beginning writing courses. First year writers often borrow from both the testimonial and the eulogy in composing their literacy narratives, and the two forms often become conflated in their portraits of former teachers. Explaining the persistence of these two forms, Newkirk concludes that “each form serves a psychological and developmental need of the writer: they show loyalty, they draw a lesson from the life of someone else, they affirm traditional values, and they are an act of thanks to those who have taken seriously their generational obligation to teach and serve as model” (56). It is important to study these portraits of teachers because, as Newkirk points out,

...the writing students do about heroes, mentors, and what Erikson calls generativity, confront issues of profound significance...How does a generation prepare the way? And how do we choose to remember that older generation? How do we construct our own narrative in a way that empowers, inspires, and sustains us? (68)

How do these vast and varied experiences of different teachers in different classroom settings influence students’ current views of writing and reading? And what rhetorical or discursive skill do students employ to compose these

narratives? More importantly, how have students “responded to, made sense of, resisted, and engaged classroom activities and explanations” (Durst and Stanforth 67).

WHAT follows are student crafted vignettes of memorable teachers — their voices comprise the core of this chapter. By including large portions of student texts I hope to create an “open text” where “students speak for themselves,” to “create a polyphony of informant voices” (Chiseri-Stater 128). As Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater argues in *Turning In Upon Ourselves*,

Polyvocality in an ethnography creates a different kind of textual validity than one mediated by the universal narrative. Since the reader — not just the researcher — has access to the textual data (at least part of it) that help inform theories and conclusions, he or she thereby assumes responsibility along with the researcher for figuring out how theories are being drawn. (129)

I introduce four excerpts of students’ memories of particular teachers. At first I spliced in a running reader’s commentary between passages, but I decided against this because of the way it broke up the text. In stringing four examples together consecutively without analysis, I hope to give readers the space to begin to formulate their own “ways of reading.” However, I do begin each passage with a short epigraph which acts as a potential lens for seeing/reading by highlighting a particular tension that I see within the text. Finally, it occurs to me that one irony in this chapter which focuses on “the other” in the form of the teacher is that it brings us around to what Lester Faigley calls “the most vexed

question in composition studies – the question of the subject” (22).¹⁵ It will become obvious in the passages that follow that writing teachers are always inevitably inviting certain kinds of subjectivities in the writing classroom.

A Gallery Of Teachers

Cultivating A Writer 's Voice

...the subject of composition is not only writing but the person who writes...in changing how they use language students can also change their sense of who they are.

—Joseph Harris, “Voice,” in *A Teaching Subject*

#1 (Molly)

Once in a lifetime every student has the privilege of having a teacher who changes everything. Though there may be teachers later on that you learn from or connect with better, there is usually one teacher who completely revamps your way of thinking. My English teacher in eighth grade, Linda Rief, was such a person. She was the first person who structured her course solely on creative writing. On the first day of school, she informed us that we all need to come to class with a pencil and a spiral notebook; I knew from the very start that I was in the right place. Mrs. Rief’s philosophy is that English students need to write and write a lot. But not once did she give her students a designated topic to do on a paper. She would often read bits and pieces of literature in class and invite responses, and every once in a while there was a unit on Shakespeare or the Holocaust. But other than that her students read what they wanted to and wrote what they wanted to.

¹⁵ Faigley says “the production of a student subject is a chief outcome of a course in composition. The molding of these subjects results not so much from the imposition of power from above as from the effects of an array of discourse practices, which in part are set out in textbooks and which serve to justify and perpetuate the field of composition” (Faigley 23).

Kids were bewildered by this. *"What do you want us to write about? How will we know if we're making mistakes?"* we would ask.

"Just write," she'd say, the rest will come later. Mrs. Rief taught me the importance of just allowing a rough draft to be rough, to worry about spelling and grammar after you get what you need to say out. It was in her class that I discovered the passion I have for writing. I learned how to revise, how to trash an idea and begin again, how to take an idea and fly with it. I also learned about critics.

At the end of the year each student was supposed to construct a portfolio of several polished (revised and edited) pieces of writing. In the last week of class we were each allotted time to present our portfolios to the class and read a selection from them. The class would then respond to your work on a little post-it note and all the notes would be stuck to your portfolio. D-Day arrived and passed for me, with no hitches. I was proud of my work, proud of my portfolio, proud of the twenty-seven pages of sci-fi that I debuted. The next day, Mrs. Rief stood before the class with our stack of portfolios. I was dying to see what she thought of my stuff.

"There is a difference between constructive criticism and just plain, mean, rude commentary. I have removed all the peer notes that I felt were inappropriate or damaging." She was talking but I didn't pay much attention. I wiggled in my chair in anticipation. The portfolios were handed back, the front of each covered in little yellow post-it notes with smiles and exclamation points all over. Mrs. Rief placed my portfolio on the desk in front of me and walked quickly away. I stared at it. On the cover wavered three lonely post-it notes. Each of them read, "Nice Job." It was all I could do not to burst into tears.

On the last day of school we got our report cards. My portfolio had earned me an A+ in English, but I didn't care. I wasn't going to be a writer. You weren't a writer if nobody wanted to read your stuff. The last thing I wanted was to fail at something else. On my way out the door Mrs. Rief handed me a spanking new copy of Annie Dillard's, *An American Childhood*.

The inscription read, *"To Molly, because someday she will write her 'American Childhood.'* It's odd to think that five years later one little sentence is the reason I'm still writing. (Molly)

(Later)

The theory that my own life could provide me with writing material was enforced last semester. I was privileged enough to have Meredith Hall as my professor. She is possibly the most amazing teacher I have had to date. In she walks on the first day of class, sits up on the table in the front of the room and proceeds to tell us we're

going to write a book this semester. Say what! Students around me gasped, and students looked at one another with open-mouthed shock. She had to be joking, this was just for her to weed out the people who would go straight down to registration to drop this class, right? She wasn't.

Personally, I relished the idea. I was starving for a writing project of massive proportions. Throughout high school every project, every paper had had its limitations, its time constraints. Here was a teacher who was saying, find an idea and write towards it for an entire semester.

"Take your ideas and fly with them," Meredith said. I did just that,

I based the entire project on a few stories I had heard about the Hungarian revolution of 1956 when I was growing up as a child in Budapest. I wrote letters to my older Hungarian friends, read books, scoured old editions of *The New York Times*. By the end of the semester, I had created a work of historical fiction that was my pride and joy. There is an amazing amount of satisfaction that comes with the knowledge that you yourself can tackle a project of that enormity and actually complete it. Over the years, I have pounced on ideas of equal magnitude and hoped to manufacture a book from it, but each project was dropped somewhere along the way. This time, I had a beginning, middle, and end, with no major holes in the middle. What was more, I actually enjoyed reading it.

The book project gave me a major confidence boost in my abilities as a writer and it also allowed me to use my own writing style. I am beginning to come into my own as a writer. I'm discovering the way I like to write and then letting myself write that way. In past years, I didn't have the confidence to believe that the way I wrote was any good. I pushed myself to write like other people, famous authors, better English students in my class, or anyone who knew better than me. Examining and trying to employ other author's styles is an important exercise to do, but being able to define and appreciate your own writing is even more important. I had finally reached a point where I was comfortable with my own work for the most part. This was an entirely new sensation for me — it was absolutely wonderful.

The search for my own writing voice is an on-going process, but I allow myself to experiment, to test genres, words and sounds. More often than not, I find myself beginning where I have always been at ease: my spiral bound notebook. (Molly)

The Feel of the Method

What we are taught is not as important as the method by which we are taught. We may forget algebra and second-year Latin, but we remember how to obey orders, suppress our own experience, and think like everyone else.

— Mary Rose O'Reilly, *The Peaceable Classroom*

2# (Emma)

Third grade meant Mrs. Merchant. She was the nightmarish, scary old teacher who would come up behind you, correct you, and threaten to slap you with a ruler if you mis-behaved. I was not very fond of her, for as I recall, she was not very big on giving ambitious students a chance to advance themselves faster. She left me with two impressions: First, I hate writing in cursive because of this woman. My baby-sitter from Vermont, whom I adored, had taught me how to sign my own name. Mrs. Merchant immediately found all the flaws in this and preyed on them. My "y's" were wrong, and my cursive slanted to the left, not to the right. Over and over I would have to re-write my assignments until they were satisfactory in her eyes. I hated it, and to this day I do NOT write in cursive; (no one can read it when I do). The other thing that stuck with me from Mrs. Merchant was her method of looking up words in the dictionary. We were expected to know where every letter occurred in the dictionary, and then open the book up to the correct letter. We would get yelled at if she heard dictionary pages being flipped. What does it matter, I thought?
(Emma)

The Constraints and Opportunities For Agency

...writing effectively—jumping the communicative gap between self and others—requires both a sense of self as traditionally understood and a sense of how, at this moment, both this self and those others have been structured by culture. Inquiry into this processes that structure both personality and discourse can help our students understand the nature of—the constraints on and opportunities for—agency."

— Alan France, "Structure and Agency"(149)

#3 (Jill)

2/25/98: "Don't let your writing be in a vacuum. Challenge all your teachers... you can carry your creativity beyond English class," I heard him say, ...yet when I take him up on this challenge he reprimands me for it.

I came into class today and he was like Jill, can I talk to you for a second. So, I go over to his desk, expecting praise for the book report I just passed in. I had just read the book, **The Catcher in the Rye**, by J.D. Salinger. I decided to be creative, (as he always encourages us to be), so I wrote my book report in the voice of Holden Caulfield.

[Excerpt from "*One Thing I Hate*" 3/8/98]

"Overall, yah, I liked it. But don't go telling my teacher, or he'll get all cocky and think he's great. Old Salinger, he's one damn good writer, and I don't give compliments like that often. I mean, old J.D. just had this great way of writing, like he was talking in the character's voice. It was kinda freaky, like I was walking around in Holden's head or something. And it was so goddamn real, it killed me. I mean real, like it could really happen. J.D. wrote like a real person, not some damn phony. And let me tell you if there is one thing I hate it's a phony."

I had so much fun writing this, and at the expense of sounding cheesy, I was so proud when I handed it in. Anyway, I go to his desk and he says, "You totally blew me away with your book report," and I am naively thinking this is a good thing. And then he goes on to say how it is great that I wanted to try something new, but I should have asked his permission to be creative.

I can just picture myself walking up to him and asking, "Excuse me, Mr. Phelps? I was just wondering if it would be okay if I was creative in my book report? I know 'Creative Writing' is the freaking title of this class and all, but I just thought I should ask." And then he asked me to "please re-write the piece," but this time "talk about how you felt about the book and not how Holden Caulfield would have felt about the book." I tried explaining that I did write about my own feelings and that I had just used Holden's voice to express my opinions. Mr. Phelps's rebuttal was something to the effect that that was not the assignment, "you were supposed to have written in your own voice." I informed him that he never made the point of it being in your own voice, and again he asked me to "re-write the piece."

I have not yet finished discussing this issue with him yet, I will not be re-writing that piece! I won't let him fall so easily into hypocrisy.

I was not typically one to debate with teachers, but when I had finally been given the green light to use my creative side, and then was slapped on the wrist for doing so, I wasn't about to go down without a fight. I had a good relationship with the teacher and wasn't intimidated to argue my side with him. I held off on re-writing the piece for about two months. Finally, I broke down and handed in a re-done paper. My teacher told me he was just about to give in to me. I guess I should have held out a little longer.

Besides that incident, senior year was a pretty positive time for my writing. I felt comfortable and free to write how I liked. My restraints had been loosened a great deal, and it was giving me a chance to develop a voice that was all my own, and not what others wanted it to sound like. (Jill)

What is remarkable about Jill's literacy narrative is how she grabs hold of an unconventional and creative form to tell her story. In the spirit of Ishmael Reed, she invokes several genres: autobiographical diary entries (the self talking to the self), with more traditional paragraphs of explication, logically analyzing what went wrong at this site of writing. She creates a double-voiced discourse—a dialectical tension between many voices: the voice of Holden Caulfield, the voice of the teacher, the voice of the diarist, the voice of logic and the voice of the literary critic. She performs many selves.

The Composition Class as Expanded or Contracted Space

The ideological space of a composition course, while never unbounded, can be expanded or contracted—and students look to determine these degrees of freedom...if we are to take culture seriously, if we are to learn about culture from our students, it follows

that we need a space big enough for a diversity of forms of self-representation.

--Tom Newkirk, *The Performance of Self*(107)

Jill addresses her need for a wider space in which to write and introduces this passage from her journal,

2/8/96

I am in English right now and we are supposed to be doing a free write on our writing. I feel like high school may cause death to my writing. We are too structured here. I feel like there are too many boundaries, too many "Focus Correction Areas," too much worry about structure, not enough about content.

The topics are stuffy and don't leave enough room for creativity.

I remember in eighth grade when I had Mrs. Cannon and Mrs. Lewis for English. I loved them. We were totally encouraged to write whatever we wanted. Yes, we had some focus areas, but they were more general, like writing in a certain genre as opposed to writing about a specific topic.

Even the atmosphere of the class encouraged more creativity. My teachers played soft background music when we would freewrite, and when we would share our stories, they would set up the room to go along with the genre. I remember when we had scary stories, we read them aloud in a candlelit room, with freaky organ music playing in the background. Writing was fun then, it is too rigid and boring now. (Jill)

"What Do You Want?" – How Ideology Undergirds Writing Assignments

...all writing will in some way show 'the pressure and presence of the institution in the work of the individual'

– Bartholomae and Petrosky, *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts*

#4 (Allie)

Senior year, that's where it all began; my permanent writer's block. Regretfully, I chose to take "*Elements of Composition*," a writing course. Honestly, I thought I could pull off an A in this class. I felt that my writing was mature and honest enough that I could get

through this class with no problem. Boy, was I wrong! My teacher was a very interesting looking African American woman who spoke very fast and was quite loud and opinionated. I felt I had done very well and handed it in. To my surprise, the next day I received my paper back with an F written across the top. As a matter of fact, every paper I wrote received an F. We did get the chance to make corrections, and then hand the paper back in, but never to get higher than a C. I was crushed. All my life I was under the impression that I had at least decent writing ability and, although I wasn't in sixth grade anymore, I had put my heart and full imagination into every paper. This led me to have no confidence in my writing and actually to hate writing.

It is hard to believe to this day that I actually wanted to become a writer and create stories and invent characters for a living. I find this very humorous because I don't even know how I'm going to make it through this class and I thought I could be an author. I can never imagine myself writing for pleasure anymore. (Allie)

Ways of Reading

[we can cultivate] "an exploratory orientation [that] allows us to focus on forces that engender thought—our desires and needs, our interests and emotions...such an affective orientation [would] include motivation, impetus, exigency, engagement, and commitment—all the elements that drive a writer to begin and continue writing" (27)

—Kristie S. Fleckenstein *"Somatic Mind"*

From these four passages I learn a few things: (1.) How very difficult it is to teach well; (2.) That sometimes a whole year (or even a whole epoch of an education) can be summed up in one's relationship to a single teacher; (3.) That students need to experience pleasure in writing in order to feel the "motivation, impetus, exigency, engagement and commitment" that keep a writer writing for a lifetime; (4.) That although it is now a commonplace to assert that the space of our writing classroom is ideological in the sense that Erving Goffman outlines,

that “prescribed activity” can lead to “prescribed being,” these literacy narrative moments offer the particularities and contours of four ideological spaces. Put another way, we need to work to see the big picture – what attitudes, beliefs and experiences are students bringing to the classroom? And what ways do race, class and gender shape the roles, activities, assignments etc.; (5.) That what constitutes “good” writing is not transparent; (6.) That if we’re not careful in terms of how we articulate aims for certain kinds of writing, as well as how (perhaps collectively) we’ll evaluate strengths and weaknesses, it’s easy for the student to feel his/her character is being graded and this will have obvious long-term (and potentially damaging consequences) in terms of the student’s relation to and willingness to write in the future.

Both of Molly’s teachers in excerpt #1 (who’re clearly regarded as “heroes” of writing) emphasize the writing relationship and they relate to students as a writer working with another writer. They both create classrooms fueled by “process” method pedagogies – including portfolios, writing workshops, peer response and writing that enters in multiple draft stages. According to the student, in both classrooms, when students first encounter this style of teaching they feel “bewilderment” and “shock.” They do not know how they will be evaluated in this new setting. The writer of this narrative is already well along the path of thinking of herself as “a writer” and since she craves “a writing assignment of massive proportions,” I think it’s safe to argue that I’m working with a student who is more the exception to the rule. What I learn is

that both teachers conceptualized the space of the writing classroom as expansive and open to experimentation. Both teachers build-in-time for thinking, reflecting, and researching, and consequently, Molly feels she's enabled to "discover the way [she] likes to write," and to feel she is "coming into [her] own" as a writer. She reinforces Annie Dillard's injunction that a writer learns to write by confronting the white page, that is, through lots of experiences with writing.

It is a little strange to focus my lens on these small, seemingly incidental memories of incidents with teachers in the setting of the writing classroom and, yet I think we can gain a lot in examining these somewhat static portraits. For example in #2, Mrs. Merchant's classroom space is considerably constricted. According to this student's memory, the English classroom is reduced to a kind of Pavlovian science lab where handwriting is measured and bodies and behaviors are carefully controlled and managed. This "nightmarish, scary old teacher" focuses on finding flaws to "prey" on them. From this student's rendition, the memory locks this teacher into a punitive role as someone focused too atomistically on the look of handwriting in lieu of the substance of language and how it's used to communicate. The setting is unpredictable except for the looming sense of threat that "if you mis-behaved" you'd be swiftly "corrected." More than any other line, I'm drawn to the moment in the narration when Emma asks, "What does it matter?" It is this kind of meta-reflexivity I'd encourage in a future re-visioning of the draft. Looking back I wonder if I couldn't have led this

student to see the ways her particular teacher may have been acting historically within a learned conception of the teacher's role as a kind of English teacher/police officer. In this way, by providing a wider context, perhaps the student may not take the method of the lessons "personally." Perhaps it wouldn't carry the same negative charge over a lifetime. Perhaps she could be led to see the value of always asking her crucial question, "*what does it matter?*" in any sort of setting that doesn't seem to make sense.

Passage #3 dovetails with passage #2 in the sense that the space for writing is constricted. Jill feels "high school may cause death to my writing" because "we are too structured here...there are too many boundaries, too many 'Focus Correction Areas,' too much worry about structure and not enough about content. The topics are stuffy and don't leave enough room for creativity." What is missing for this writer is what Kirstie Fleckenstein articulates in "*Somatic Mind*" – the need for "an exploratory orientation [that] allows us to focus on forces that engender thought – 'our desires and needs, our interests and emotions...such an affective orientation includes motivation, impetus, exigency, engagement, and commitment – all the elements that drive a writer to begin and continue writing" (27). According to Jill, death-to-writing is caused when a writer is unable to pursue what Sondra Perl calls "felt sense," or what Fleckenstein calls "those forces which engender thought."

In Passage #4, Allie invokes the sentimental tradition. She writes, "I thought I could pull off an A in this class. I felt that my writing was mature and

honest enough." Allie conflates "A" work with the shape of her character, i.e. if she is "mature" and "honest" sounding in her prose, then she earns an A. The teacher is rendered as "quite loud and opinionated." Revision is regarded simplistically by teacher and student alike as consisting of merely making "corrections." I suspect in a first-reading, I read precisely the way Newkirk instructs English teachers to resist reading and yet I do see how confusing it must be for her to write with her "heart and full imagination" and then to receive an "F." If one inserts the full syllogism we can infer from this scene that: "I write with my heart and full imagination. I receive an F. Therefore, my heart and full imagination are "F" material." It is not a stretch to see how one writer's sense of self gets easily eroded in this view of events. It helps to explain why Allie no longer can conceive of "writing for pleasure" or wanting to become a "writer [who] creates stories and invents characters for a living." According to Lester Faigley in *Fragments of Rationality* this student's conception of "good" writing has its roots in a distinct view of writing pedagogy,

the student achieves excellence because he or she is either 'honest' (James Britton, Roger Garrison, Larry Levy, Erika Lindemann), writes in an "authentic voice" (Harvey Daniels, Leo Rockas), or possesses "integrity" (Walker Gibson...Erika Lindemann says, 'Good writing is most effective when we tell the truth about who we are and what we think.' (Faigley 121)

The "cautionary" part of a tale like Allie's is that she leads me to see the way student bodies become the sites where contradictions within the field of English get played out. We must be careful to establish goals for each particular writing

assignment and to talk as a class about what constitutes “good writing” in each particular genre, or each particular form of writing — so that grades don’t become easy equations with a student’s character.

What follows are portraits of teachers who are remembered for their innovative approaches to teaching ways of writing, reading and thinking and who work to create an expansive classroom space. They construct a vision of learning that is somehow larger than the institutional vision of education which always involves assessment. These teachers model ways of learning that exist over a lifetime.

Teacher Eccentricities

...we need to remind ourselves...that we are often speaking to a group of students who are in class against their interest and will, who are bored, aggravated, and, in some cases, angered by the role we are performing.

—Lad Tobin, *Writing Relationships*

What I would like to see emerge in this country is a more holistic way of conceiving of education...a way of teaching that is not just task-oriented but always looking over its shoulder at everything going on around.

—Jane Tompkins, *A Life in School*

OVER and over again in literacy histories I encounter vignettes of teachers who drop the mask of a more traditional teacherly persona in a number ways, taking risks in front of the class that are considered at the time somewhat “strange,” yet leave indelible marks. These are memories of teachers who find a “way in” to students attention, who crack through a tough veneer of boredom

and aggravation. In this next section I offer excerpts of students' memories of certain teachers' eccentricities to examine ways in which a peculiar pedagogy can sometimes shape literacy instruction. Here I am working against a representation of teachers like the one Celine offers when she writes,

He was one of those 'always follow the rules' kind of teacher. Just by having one conversation with him you could tell he didn't live a very risk filled life. His teaching showed the kind of life he had: very restricted and limited. He was always very stern and he never joked around with anybody. (Celine)

What follows are memories of teachers who reveal a "human" side of themselves, an embodied persona that is alive both inside and outside of the classroom. If we can learn anything from slightly eccentric portraits of teachers it is that sometimes the English teacher can make gains by loosening the hold of long-held, culturally-loaded stereotype of the English teacher. If the teacher's life entails a measure of visible risk—students are more inclined to take risks in their teacher's presence. The following student stories of teachers include aspects of the self-in-school that sometimes get sidelined or suppressed: elements of the self that demonstrate "emotion, imagination, spirituality, respect for the body's needs" (Tompkins xviii).

Excerpts About Teacher's Eccentricities from The Students' Literacy Narratives:

#1

- On September 12, twelve students arrived early, demonstrating the usual nervous punctuality of the first day of school. The only

light in the room came from the open door and the window that was only half above ground. When I arrived, six students had already claimed their place around the table. Somebody had turned on the overhead lights. [The teacher's] first words were, "*You know, we're all going to get cancer from those florescent bulbs.*" She flicked the switch and turned on several desk lamps scattered throughout the room. "*There much better,*" she concluded, "*Now let's loosen up.*" Ms. Riley grabbed a baseball off her desk. "*A verb beginning with s, I start, stop*" and with one quick motion she let the ball go. All of our eyes followed it around the table. "*Somebody needs to catch the ball,*" Ms. Riley said sarcastically. We started again: "*Sleep,*" "*store,*" "*save,*" "*sand,*" "*surprise,*" "*steam...*" the ball criss-crossed the table creating an imaginary pattern linking us all together.

- (Later)

On Halloween in the middle of class, blood started dripping from her mouth. The students on the periphery of the heated conversation noticed first, their cries of shock quickly caused everybody to look at Ms. Riley. A red-dyed corn starch puddle formed on the table. A few hesitant "*ums*" filled the air and then after a long silence, as our teacher oozed a thick red liquid from her mouth somebody laughed, then everybody laughed and Mrs. Riley cracked a smile showing red stained teeth. She got up from the table, grabbed a tissue and cleaned up the puddle in front of her. "*Well, let's continue the discussion,*" she said faking exasperation, as she threw the Kleenex away. I started the discussion where we had left off and Ms. Riley (our English teacher with the flattest sense-of-humor of anybody I have ever met) prodded me to clarify my ideas.

Ms. Riley was not the best English teacher and her class was not the most interesting, but Ms. Riley was the most interesting character I have ever had for an English teacher. Maybe because she was so different from any other woman I have ever met. The way she dressed, her sense of humor, how she acted did not conform to the "norm." I took notice of all the small details, because she intrigued me. The picture of the homeless man she befriended in San Francisco, the Larry Bird poster that hung on the ceiling, and the only piece of jewelry she ever wore, a silver ring, fed my curiosity. She was like a character in a novel. Ms. Riley inspired literacy through her personality and her actions. She made me want to write about her, to capture her on the page

and discover the intricacies of her character through writing.
(Madeleine)

#2

- High School. I don't really feel like I got a lot out of that hellhole but if I did it was from a teacher I had my senior year. Mr Brouse. He is the one guy I will never forget. He came in the first day of class and sat on his desk, took out his guitar, and started playing and singing. All class. No one really said anything but next class everyone just sat down and listened to what he had to say. He had us do this assignment where we had to think and write about everything we knew. This assignment was the first assignment that I ever enjoyed doing. I sat at my desk and thought and thought about it until I had a paper that I thought was good. Judging by my standards and not anyone else's. I got an A.

#3

- Mrs. Bouchoris was a tall, pear-shaped Lithuanian woman. Her hair was gray and curly and done in a two inch Afro around her skull. She had a big heart. She loved poetry and painting. Remembering back to that class, I feel like that's all we did. We'd spend an entire afternoon painting. She would tell us magnificent stories. Stories about growing up in Lithuania during the war, meeting her husband, stories about her mother. I remember them clearly. My favorite story was about when her good friend died. She went to the gravestone to put flowers in front of it. Standing there she began to cry. It was a cloudy day and at that moment the clouds parted and the sun shone down and a little bird came and landed on her shoulder. "It was as though my friend was telling me that she was all right." Her stories were passionate. Everything she did was passionate. (Anna)

#4

- In ninth grade, the year I took typing and hated it, Miss Slipp turned me on to Shakespeare. This woman, my freshman English teacher, was in her late 60's and appeared to be in her late 80's. But her mother was still alive, so we knew she wasn't lying about her age. She stood about 6'4" and had a mass of white curls adorning her head. She organized a group called "Slipp's Shakespeareans" and we did one full out Shakespeare production a year. In her lived a passion for acting, which she imbued in me.

And also a passion for teaching and learning and being literate. She could quote a snatch of Shakespeare for any occasion, even reprimands. She was the one that made me feel passion for the written word. Seventeenth century words I considered long dead and foreign were suddenly brought to resounding life. The Bard was *really* funny, and he *really* knew love and he *really* knew tragedy. I was excited and I tried to write sonnets for nonexistent lovers. I dove into these words because they were beautiful and if you *really* read them, you could find such truth in them, even in the present day. Even in your own personal life. We were just beginning freshman year when I got a phone call one night telling me that Miss Slipp had died. I performed Shakespeare at her eulogy. (Alyssa)

WHAT stands out in these representations of teachers are the *ethos* they create in the classroom—an ethos tied to a sense of humor, an ability to take risks and admit error. They are teachers whose teaching is organically shaped by the way they live their lives. Students give a great deal of attention to shape, dress and demeanor of teacher's bodies. They study bodies as much they study the words delivered. I think they're always looking for a confluence between the life of the body and the life of the mind—and confluence between the life in and outside of school. In disrupting the educational "norm" (and schools are notoriously conservative institutions) these teachers bring an element of surprise, delight and whimsy to the classroom. They circle around the way "the personal" inserts itself in the "public" space of the classroom jostling everybody's taken-for-granted understanding about what is to happen.

Students are taught to work with teachers as teachers, not necessarily human beings. Students tend to remember moments when the teacherly persona

slips to reveal the private person – “an approach to teaching that acknowledges the humanness of both teachers and students” (Tomkins xiv). Jane Tomkins tells the following story of a salient memory of a teacher because she says “it symbolizes something that was missing from education as [she] knew it: the reality of the private life. (xv) She writes,

I remember, when I try to recall, hardly any instances in which my teachers told us something about their own lives. The only instance that stands out was in third grade, when Mrs. Higgins, my favorite teacher, told us, for reasons I shall never know, that that morning her son brought her a glass of orange juice while she was in the shower. It had something to do with her having a cold...

What I remember feeling at the time had nothing to do with Freudian relationships. Rather, I was amazed and pleased to learn that Mrs. Higgins had a family life just as I did...It was the sense of life itself that was missing [from school], of sensory and emotional experience not divided up into ‘subjects’ – hygiene, psychology, nutrition, family relations – embedded in a narrative, part of a lived history I could relate to my history and the histories of people around me, how we felt, what we really thought about, what it was like for us to be alive and going through the world. (xv)

Sister Rosetta

There is probably no better published example of the embodied, “eccentric” and subversive teacher than in Judith Ortiz Cofer’s literacy narrative, “*My Rosetta*.” Cofer says that her education was meant to prepare her for “a good Catholic life...and a predictable future as a good Catholic barrio woman” (70). Yet the narrative of her life takes a surprising turn when she meets “Sister Rosetta” who was “anything but the docile bride of Jesus” she expected. Cofer,

like students in their narratives, moves quickly into a physical sketch of this unusual teacher,

She was not an attractive woman. Her face, although bright with wit, belonged to an Irish guy with a tough job, perhaps a construction foreman or a cop. If a nun's coif had not framed those features—the slightly bulbous nose, plump red-veined cheeks and close set eyes—this could have been the face of a heavy drinker or a laborer. She walked without grace but with a self-assured step...she'd lift herself onto the desk and face us, hands on hips as if to say, *What a shit job this is.*

And it was. (70)

Then, what follows in Cofer's narrative is what often follows in students memories of unusual teachers who leave an indelible impression: the presence of unorthodox pedagogical practices, in this case—a literacy lesson, incorporating music,

“Ok, my little dumplings,” Sister Rosetta would greet us, squinting like a coach about to motivate her team. “Today we are going to get in touch with our souls through music. Now listen carefully. You’ve never heard anything like this.” Out of curiosity at first, then in near rapture, that day I listened to the exotic music of Ravi Shankar emerge from the old turntable Sister Rosetta had dragged in...She must have noticed my enchantment, because Sister Rosetta handed me the record album as I was walking out of her overheated classroom. All she said was, “Bring it back without a scratch...” (71)

What is also striking about this narrative is the root metaphor for teaching. Lad Tobin in *Writing Relationships* imagines a series of possible postures for teachers and students: **“The Teacher as Performer, The Class as Audience,”** or **“Teacher as Dinner Party Host, Students as Guests,”** or **“Teacher as Parent, Students as**

Adolescent Children,” finally, “Teacher as Preacher, Students as Congregation” (Tobin 80-87). What is significant in these root metaphors is how the vision shapes the teacher and the potential roles students can enter into. What is valuable about Sister Rosetta is that she conceives of teaching as a little like “coaching,” both pushing her students and rooting for them at the same time. She comes the closest to Tobin’s conception of “Teacher as Dinner Party Host” believing, “we need to provide some sort of nourishment, and entertainment needs to be planned” and there needs to be “a certain edge, an air of expectation and anticipation” (83)

“Everything But the Kitchen Sink”: An Eclectic Curriculum

...my object here is to examine a special kind of absenteeism, a defaulting not from prescribed activity but from prescribed being.

— Erving Goffman, “The Underlife of a Public Institution” in *Asylums*.

The sociologist Erving Goffman argues in his book *Asylums* that the most important factor in forming a mental-hospital patient is the institution, not the illness, and that the patient’s reactions and adjustments are those of inmates in other types of total institutions as well. In my own experiences, the teachers that live in my memory were individuals who performed what Goffman calls “underlife” behaviors or “a special kind of absenteeism” — that is, they worked

within the institution for the institution but they had a vision that was inordinately larger than the institution's vision.

My English teacher in my senior year of high school, Dr. Santa Lucia, would present classical records to the student who had written a particularly strong paper. Once I received Copeland's *Appalachian Spring* for a paper on Robinson Jeffer's poem, "*Signposts*" and I received a Beethoven record for my paper on attic imagery in Dostoyevsky's, *Crime and Punishment*. There was something delightful about Dr. Santa Lucia's joy for classical music...the way he fused two passions and then brought them both into the classroom to share with us. The message I got from receiving those records was that my writing had communicated something that went beyond a grade and, because I'd demonstrated a concerted effort, Santa Lucia would bless me with the gift of a view beyond the reality of the classroom—in this case, the world of Beethoven and Copeland.

Later in graduate school, I had a professor insist (because we had such a long, late day seminar) that we make a point of incorporating food into our late afternoon curriculum. Each week a new person brought a new item: fresh fruit, cheese and crackers, homemade Spanikopita. This is the "*underlife*" of the institution of schooling—small breaks within the taken for granted protocol for activities. Goffman writes in detail of the role of individuals within institutions,

part of the individual's obligation it to be visibly engaged at appropriate times in the activity of the organization, which entails a mobilization of attention and muscular effort, a bending of oneself to

the activity at hand. This obligatory engrossment in the activity of the organization tends to be taken as a symbol both of one's commitment and one's attachment, and, behind this, of one's acceptance of participation for a definition of one's nature. (Goffman 177)

The best teachers, as students tell it, are those who don't assume "obligatory engrossment" but who earn it, through enthusiasm, and quirky unorthodox methods and their profound respect for students' inherent strengths and capabilities, as well as an acute understanding of the limitations for movement of the body in the prescribed classroom space.

Multi-Media Lessons

Another way that teachers manifest "*underlife*" and create an air of anticipation is to work in many mediums: from newspaper to film to photography, to music, to a willingness to introduce writing across a range of genres. Incorporating many mediums to communicate layered meanings is to perform what Belenky calls a "connected kind of knowing." Forging connections between texts and other mediums, Judith Ortiz Cofer remembers,

In the guise of teaching Catholic doctrine, Sister Rosetta managed to introduce each of her classes to an eclectic curriculum that included folk music, Eastern philosophy, classical music, dance and yoga, world literary masterpieces, and popular culture. I watched in awe as this stocky, plain woman transformed herself into the most attractive person I knew whenever she talked with passionate eloquence about things all the other adults either ignored or disdained. (71)

Cofer says Sister Rosetta brought her a sack full of books, keeping her constantly fed with books. She didn't ask her what books she wanted and she didn't quiz the young Ortiz — she just steeped her in literature: Hawthorne, Poe, *The Odyssey*, the stories of Katherine Anne Porter, Dante, the Romantic poets, even James Joyce...(74). In the end of this complex literacy narrative simply written, Cofer says this about her teacher:

What I remember about the year I spent under this remarkable woman's tutelage is her teaching me to see with my whole self, not just with my eyes. Thanks to her, I learned that the power of knowledge lies in seeking the answer to the question I can always ask of the past, the present, and the future: *why?* Even now I can recall that summer, call up almost any memory in living color and in stereophonic sound, thanks to Sister Rosetta's training of my mind and her education of my senses. [She gave me] my first essential tool as a writer: the ability to absorb sensory detail from the pungent aroma *la vida*, the siren call of religion, the aftertaste of victory. I learned to re-experience it all with my mind and later on the page. Those months were the beginning of my long affair with the word...introduced into my life when I needed it most by the most unlikely and remarkable of mentors, my radical sister, my Rosetta. (78)

Passion Performed

To engage in a particular activity in the prescribed spirit is to accept being a particular kind of person who dwells in a particular kind of world.

— Erving Goffman, "The Underlife of a Public Institution" in *Asylums*

The key word that reappears in the narratives of eccentric or memorable teachers is a sense of passion in equal parts for both the students and the discipline. They're teachers who have found ways to renew their own energy. Mary Rose O'Reilly observes in *The Peaceable Classroom* that

many of us...judge our effectiveness by the quality of our stigmata. There are many reasons why...we should stop abusing ourselves this way—it doesn't help students (especially beginners) learn, it ruins our health...but the most important reason is that it ultimately makes us hate students. Lots of teachers hate students, for reasons that have to do with the disproportion between what we put out and what they take in: a disproportion so great that surely, we think, it can only be the result of students' malice. (50)

From the excerpts about semi-eccentric teachers in the student literacy histories I learn that the key words and ideas seem to be: passion, enjoyment, intrigue, a sense of the power of stories, a value placed on physical motion, light, and personality/character. I receive confirmation in what I've always known, as Wendy Bishop writes, "my intuitive understanding of the power of personal writing and my intellectual understanding of the force of discourse and culture need to commune—that heart and brain have to unite in teaching" (130 "*Teaching Lives*"). Each of the teachers above refuse to be diminished by the regulatory actions of the larger institution—they make me realize how some behaviors are preferably legislated out of existence: like the presence of personal stories like Mrs. Boucheris tells, or physical motion, like the ball Ms. Riley tosses around the classroom, or the refusal to stay in character as "The Teacher" when Ms. Riley breaks with her role as authority and acts like a vampire foaming red around the lips. And Mr. Brouse who "took out his guitar and started playing and singing. All class." Goffman says, "to prescribe activity is to prescribe a world; to dodge a prescription can be to dodge an identity." I think what these teachers offer students (in addition to literacy lessons) are lessons in identity as shape-shifting

and malleable and stronger when passionately spirit-driven. They demonstrate “the challenge for us as teachers is to both show our students our involvement in and excitement for the world beyond the classroom, and to still remain close and responsive to students’ needs” (Atwell-Vasey 109).

Chapter 4: "Rise to Success" Narratives: Literacy As Accumulation, Display and Consumption

The story of my literate history is a story of a long progression. It is a progression from confusion to understanding, from fear to love, from boredom to amazement, from enslavement to freedom. In my understanding of literacy I am still deeply progressing.

— Lucy

The literacy myth necessarily grows out of an easy and unfounded assumption that literacy leads to economic development, cultural progress, and individual improvement.

— Eldred and Mortensen *"Reading Literacy Narratives"*

OUR culture is saturated with stories of individuals who "make" themselves through "luck and pluck" and the Puritan work ethic. Peter Rabinowitz argues in *Before Reading*, that "cultures provide prefabricated narratives for hooking up the events of our lives" and when it comes to student stories of literacy there is no more enticing narrative than the conventional "rise to success" story (181). In this chapter I show how viewing literacy as a clear progression from ignorance to enlightenment is an irresistible plot for students to plug into. It has tremendous cultural cachet. What is so powerful about this convention in particular is the hope it offers in the power of humans to change for the better. And yet, what I also hope to show in this chapter is that the equation (as students sometimes render it) is not so simple.

To begin, in narratives of self-making, both male and female students adopt the quintessential American pattern of narration that Ben Franklin set up in his rise-to-success *Autobiography*.¹⁶ A key component of this convention is the belief in singular agency. Jill Ker Conway observes that Franklin's self-presentation "defined for the first time the archetypal figure of the capitalist hero..." (19). Franklin was self-taught in rhetoric and logic and writes, "While I was intent on improving my language, I met with an English Grammar... at the end of which there were two little sketches of the *Arts of Rhetoric and Logic*...I took Delight in it, practis'd it continually and grew very artful and expert" (Conway 20). Conway observes that "there is no hint of the longing for a skilled teacher...[Franklin] wants the reader to believe that all he learned was through his own agency, mastered quickly and deployed without misconstruction or error" (20). The idea that one can teach oneself in a disciplined way, in the manner of the Puritan work ethic, is strongly at work in so many student narratives, as Chris shows in this brief passage,

"I am driven to *better myself*, to know all that I can because I want to *improve myself*. Just the other day in class I couldn't say *luminous* and I was so embarrassed I went home and sounded it out about one hundred times until I

¹⁶ For an interesting study of this genre, see *Made in America: Self-Styled Success from Horatio Alger to Oprah Winfrey*, by Jeffrey Louis Decker. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. Decker looks at how nontraditional entrepreneurs (women, minorities, and immigrants) appropriate roles traditionally reserved for white, Anglo-Saxon men, and by appropriating these popular models of middle-class uplift, they alter them.

could say it" (*italics added*). And a similar logic can be seen at work in the way Jules, another student, frames her literacy history,

From the time that I was a baby and certainly as far back as I can remember, every book has been presented to me as a secular version of the Bible. They filled my playpen, my crib, highchair, and bedroom floor. I have even seen photographs of me deeply engrossed in storybooks while sitting on the toilet...By the time I was four, I had taught myself to read. And I didn't stop. (Jules)

She, like other students, holds on to a conception of literacy as an individual attribute as opposed to literacy as a social act (LeFevre). Sylvia Scribner offers a series of probing and useful questions in her essay, "*Literacy in Three Metaphors*"¹⁷ when she asks,

- What activities are carried out with words?
- What significance is attached to them?
- What status is conferred to those who engage in them?

(Scribner 72)

Clues about how to answer these questions can be found in Jules's first paragraph. She suggests she received her books along with her mother's milk. By saying they were "secular versions of the Bible" she shows that literacy in her family was given sacred status and by extension, her family demonstrates "the cultural tendency to endow the literate person with special virtues" (Scribner 75). She has documentary proof that she read a lot because family members capture

¹⁷ I assign this essay as a secondary reading to accompany the primary readings in the Literacy Narrative packet—see Chapter 1. I find Scribner's questions are a helpful frame to open up the discussion about other readings.

an image of her reading on the toilet. Employing the rhetoric of the self-made person she argues, “by the time I was four I had taught myself to read.” There is no acknowledgment that the nameless, faceless family members who place books in her “playpen...crib, highchair, and bedroom floor” have anything to do with her reading capabilities.

Perhaps students also borrow the ethic of self-improvement from such popular fiction as Horatio Alger’s *Ragged Dick and Struggling Upward* stories. For example, as Alger writes “in the boot-blackening business, as well as in higher avocations, the same rule prevails, that energy and industry are rewarded, and indolence suffers” (8). These narratives, fueled largely by economic motives, lead me to believe as J. Ellspeth Stuckey argues in *The Violence of Literacy*, that “far from engineering freedom, [many of the] current approaches to literacy corroborate other social practices that prevent freedom and limit opportunity” (Stuckey vii). In reading these narratives my students hold a mirror up for me to see the ways we all exist within a continuum of materialism and creativity. I think as teachers we benefit from acknowledging the force of this continuum.¹⁸ Nevertheless, in reading these “success” narratives, I no longer unequivocally

¹⁸ For an in-depth study that explores the tension produced in not acknowledging this continuum, see Russel K. Durst in *Collision Course: Conflict, Negotiation, and Learning in College Composition*. Illinois: NCTE, 1999. Durst explains, “On the one-hand, most students in first-year college composition are career-oriented pragmatists who view writing as a difficult but potentially useful technology. These students would generally prefer to learn a way of writing that is simple, quick, and efficient; applicable in all or most situations; and either reducible to a formula or straightforward set of rules, or free from rules, prescriptions and restrictions. Experienced consumers of a wide range of products, students see writing as a technology which, like most technologies, should be designed not to complicate their already stressful, busy lives, but rather to make their lives run more smoothly. (2)

connect “success” (as I understand the word) to my students’ use of the rise to success motif. And students’ sometimes static conceptions of “success” have undoubtedly played a role in shaping my curriculum. If anything, they make me want to go slower and deeper with the activities of the class.

THERE is also a continuum in the *kinds* of “rise to success narratives” I’ve received from students. On one end, some stories show feeling inspired in the acts of reading and writing in ways we couldn’t possibly chart or measure, ways that seem spiritually, intellectually, aesthetically sustaining. On the other end, there are stories that chart a “rise to success” in more materialist terms, regarding literacy as a consumptive act with little to no mention of any accompanying inner transformation.

Within this larger continuum there are three smaller motifs which I explore in more detail: (1.) One kind of narrative posits literacy as the “key to success” with “success” viewed in unquestioned and uncomplicated ways (**literacy as accumulation**). (2.) Another type of narrative include stories about reading-for-prizes which celebrate a relationship between literacy and extrinsic rewards (**literacy as consumption**), (3.) Finally, a number of students cast their stories as “child prodigy” narratives—a (perhaps) defensive, protective way to position the self against questioning or critique (**literacy as display**). Here, I work from fragments of texts or isolated paragraphs that seem to borrow the rhetoric of the self-made person—and I hope to unpack the complex set of motives and assumptions attached to this rhetoric.

Note: There are scenes of reading that I regard as successful in the sense that literacy is sustenance-giving, where “the interaction of the mind and book is something more complex...encompassing an intimate history and geography” (Schwartz 2). However, these scenes of reading for pleasure don’t seem to employ the same rhetoric of the self-made person in the “rise to success.” Rather, these other kinds of “success” narratives conceive of reading and writing as more recursive, spiral activity than literacy on a linear trajectory. Here, I focus my attention more on what I consider to be potentially problematic conceptions of the kind of literacy. They make me question: *What does it mean to “improve” oneself? What does it mean to “better” oneself?* These are complicated questions.

To complicate the word “success” even more (as students use the term), I turn to a few literary texts: (for motif #2 **Reading For Prizes**) I turn to Abraham Cahan’s, *The Rise of David Levinsky*; and for (motif #3 **Child Prodigy Narratives**) Lynne Sharon Schwartz’s *Ruined By Reading* and for (**Literacy as Accumulation**), Tobias Wolff’s, *“This Boy’s Life.”*

Briefly: Cahan’s novel shows that literacy may lead to “economic development” and “cultural progress” but it does not necessarily lead to individual satisfaction. Cahan offers a somewhat impoverished notion of literacy based largely on a need for external reward versus a kind of intrinsic power. I’ll point to Cahan’s fiction to show that many students follow this same pattern of basing success on external evaluation and extrinsic rewards versus intrinsic accomplishment—a functionalist approach vs. a spiritualist approach to

literacy (Scribner). Students can hardly be faulted for a functional approach to literacy, since the long process of their education has them involved in what Richard Miller calls “a prestige based economy” (34). In this economy, Miller argues, “the ideal recruit [is] too given to the pleasures of the mind to care what deprivations may await the body” (35).

In *Ruined By Reading*, Lynne Sharon Schwartz identifies herself as a “child prodigy” in her literate abilities at a very young age – which is another extremely popular move within student literacy narratives.

There is a portion of *This Boy's Life* that is a variation on the “rise to success” except with a twist. Wolff fabricates a portrait of his self-accomplishments and yet he feels that the things he’s written (in his self-authored letters of recommendation) are somehow more truthful than the reality of his life. He uses this fabricated version of the self to act his way into a competitive prep school environment. I’ll point to Wolff’s memoir to show that some students “act as if” and choose to render their literate abilities as just ahead of where they truly are, as a necessary step on the way of acting into a better self.

Schwartz, Cahan and Wolff’s texts all help to show the often dis/abling properties of literacy narratives – the story of one’s “rise” through the educational system can at times be both “abling” and potentially crippling, depending on how you read the story.

Examples From The Student Literacy Histories of Literacy as Accumulation

Motif #1 – “Bettering Oneself”

- I have always had an obsession with bettering myself. I took pride in my abilities from a very young age...My mom decided that during the summer I had to do a booklet of English every week. My parents pushed me very hard as a child to do well in school. (Jimmy)
- My parents taught me from day one that literacy was the key to success, in one form or the other. I was always told that I wouldn't get a job if I couldn't read. As time progressed, and I had learned to read, my parents told me that *I needed to read more*. Through repetition they programmed into my brain that reading equals success, which I felt led me to be more determined to make money than being happy. (Taylor)
- Having my parents support and positive pressure to get good grades made me see how important a good education is. (Kathleen)

Ways of Reading

What strikes me in these brief excerpts are the presence of parents and the “positive pressure” they apply. The formula for success (defined as a determination “to make money) via literacy is rendered in natural terms in these brief prose moments. Students tend to gloss over these sections. There is a taken-for-granted quality in their descriptions of reading-for-success that is disturbing to me now, especially in phrases like “good grades made me see how important an education is.” Since this is a complicated idea rendered in uncomplicated terms, *there is great potential for future critical analysis in these passages*. These students touch on a way of talking about literacy as a static thing

that brings “good grades” or “money” or approval. The commodified version of literacy is disturbing but not surprising and students are certainly not unique in this philosophy of “dealing in futures.”¹⁹ Linda Brodkey writes in *Writing on the Bias*,

In the neighborhood I was fed food and conversation in exchange for writing. At school I learned to trade my words for grades and degrees, in what might be seen as the academic equivalent of dealing in futures—speculation based on remarkably little information about my prospects as an academic commodity. (579)

For Brodkey school-literacy doesn’t offer her an embodied literacy that is sustenance-giving. Instead she articulates the essential commodification of writing in school.²⁰ Her text also points to the ways parents figure predominantly in the background of these texts, nudging, coaxing and forcing literate activities.²¹ In “Middle-Class Childraising: Ambivalence and Anxiety” Barbara Ehrenreich looks at how parents, in their uneasiness about how to bring up children, turn increasingly to books, magazines and radio programs for cultural assistance (Ehrenreich 83). She outlines the dilemma of middle-class parents,

On the one hand, they must encourage their children to be innovative and to ‘express themselves,’ for these traits are usually valued in the professions. But the child will never gain entry to a profession in the

¹⁹ See Powell, Arthur G. et. al. *The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in The Educational Marketplace*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1985.

²⁰ See also: Darrell Fike and Devon Cook. “ ‘Would You Like Fries With That?’ Ordering Up Some Writing: Fast Food For Thought,” in *Elements of Alternate Style: Essays on Writing and Revision*. Edited by Wendy Bishop. NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1997: 11-18.

²¹ See David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950. He describes the “contagious, highly diffusive anxiety” middle class parents bring to the business of parenting.

first place without developing a quite different set of traits, centered on self-discipline and control. (84)

The tension here is hard to reconcile for students, parents and teachers alike. In a simplistic economical equation, many students come to school for “good grades” which will in turn give them gainful employment. And there are also those students who “are highly privileged underachievers, most of whom don’t excel in school because success in this realm simply doesn’t matter to them” (Miller, *As If Learning Mattered* 4). In calling attention to this recurring theme in literacy narratives, I don’t propose a coup d’etat on the meritocracy of the American educational system, so much as to raise the questions that in constructing narratives in this way, *what’s missing? What gets left out?*

2. Reading For Prizes: Literacy as Consumption

Abraham Cahan’s protagonist, David Levinsky projects a self “set in motion” so that “no amount of success could satisfy [his] need, or quell [his] drive” (Sanders 67). David Levinsky draws his “own map” (as Meek recommends) and he begins his story by reflecting back on his childhood and on his early Talmudic teachers, such as Rabbi Sender, as well as those who forbade his learning to write, like the “little Talmudist with a tough little beard who held every body in terror” with his “violent temper and pugnacity” (32). He explains that he wrote for his mother, he wrote for food and he wrote to emulate his friend, Nephtali’s “cleanliness, his graceful Talmudic gestures, and his handwriting” (35). What is significant about these examples are the motives which

fuel the literate acts. He writes for attention, for reward and to emulate the sophisticated and cultivated gestures he sees accompanying literacy. His map includes no mention of reading for the intrinsic reward of loving the sound of the words on the page, the beauty of language, the wealth of information to be experienced vicariously.

Levinsky's "attitude" toward reading and writing is indicative of his attitude toward life in general — it is something to be conquered, or mastered, in order to bring fame and recognition. His attitude toward literacy may help to understand why he thinks of literacy in terms of consumption and why he begins the story in this way....

Sometimes, when I think of my past in a superficial, casual way, the metamorphosis I have gone through strikes me as nothing short of a miracle. I was born and reared in the lowest depths of poverty and I arrived in America — in 1885 — with four cents in my pocket. I am now worth more than two million dollars and recognized as one of the two or three leading men in the cloak-and-suit trade in the United States. And yet when I take a look at my inner identity it impresses me as being precisely the same as it was thirty or forty years ago. My present station, power, the amount of worldly happiness at my command, and the rest of it, seem to be *devoid of significance*. (3)

He posits an inner identity that remains stagnant, untouched by outward metamorphoses.

He does, however, obtain the literacy necessary to operate within the discourse of the public sphere of a Capitalist market economy. Not unlike my students, Levinsky becomes a sophisticated reader of culture. He says, "I sought

to dress like a genteel American, my favorite color for clothes and hats being (and still is) dark brown....The difference between taste and vulgar ostentation was coming slowly but surely, I hope" (260). He tries desperately to erase his early Talmudic gestures by keeping his hands contained within his pockets. He watches American smokers and "stud(ies) their ways" (326). The "presentation" of self in everyday life becomes a "conscious...performance," just like reading is a kind of performance done more for the show of "class" than for the content.²² In this way he is given breaks in America not simply because of his literary talents but also for his ability to "read" culture and to adopt the proper ways of walking, dining, dressing and negotiating other cultural values. Students pick up on this same theme, as Alexa shows in her literacy history when she writes,

The first story I truly loved was *Cinderella*...Strangely, it wasn't the fairy tale that I loved. It wasn't the prince, the ball or the fairy godmother. It was the dress. I could not believe how lucky Cinderella was to wear a dress like that!
(and later)

The person who read to me was my grandmother. I used to sit on her lap in her rocking chair, inhaling the sweet faint scent of tea and cigarettes. She was the one who read *The Emperor's New Clothes*... In retrospect, it seems strange that two of my favorite stories were about clothes and outward appearances. At the age of four or five, I had a sense of how important it was to always look right and to give a good impression. (Alexa)

Ways of Reading

Alison Lurie (1981) questions "is clothing not virtually a visual language, with its own distinctive grammar, syntax, and vocabulary? (Davis 3). Students

²² See Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 1959.

like Alexa seem especially skilled at reading a “more theatrical and contextual” kind of communication, one that involves “non-verbal” cues (Goffman *Presentation 4*). As Cahan’s narrative demonstrates there is a creative element involved in these literacy as consumption models—in the sense that one learns to read culture to fashion an identity that works. Or as Fred Davis writes in *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, “...we are not the passive recipients of identities ascribed to us by some remote abstract entity termed ‘society’ (17).

Reading for Prizes/ Literacy as Consumption Examples From the Literacy Histories

- I joined the book club at the Londonderry Leach Library when I got a little older. As I finished books I got rewarded with prizes. I remember getting gift certificates to McDonald’s for free french fries. Every book you read counted towards an entry in the raffle to win big prizes. The library book club motivated me to read. (Gwen)

(Later)

The last years of elementary school encouraged reading through the “*Book It*” programs. Every month if a student read a certain number of books they were given a certificate to receive a free personal pan pizza from Pizza Hut. I made sure I read my books for the month to get my pizza. If I wasn’t finished my monthly reading goal for *Book IT* I stayed up late the night before it had to be complete in order to receive my free pizza. It was a great incentive to get students reading.

The Reading Meritocracy

- The first thing I remember about reading was when I was in the first grade. Highrock Elementary School was having a “readathon.”

Students who read ten books or more, won a bronze seal, students who read twenty-five books won a silver seal, and if we read fifty or more we won a gold seal. My teacher said I’d better read at least fifty or he’d be mad. Everybody told me I was a good reader but I didn’t care much for reading, so I just picked out the shortest, easiest books in the library. I picked Dr. Seuss books that I had already read, “See Spot Run” books, and any other super easy book that I wouldn’t have to waste too much time to read. My teacher made us bring the books we’d read to show him that we were reading. When he saw the books I had been reading he totally flipped out on me and made me start over. At the end of the month I had only won a silver seal. I hated reading. (Adam)

Reading for Personal Pan Pizzas

- “Kevin, *How many books have you read?*” asks Mrs. Trubiano, my first grade teacher. “Six,” I reply with a smile on my face. At that time, I would read any amount of books just for pizza, and since Pizza Hut was running the read-a-thon, I could do just that. Mrs. Trubiano smiles and places the rest of the stickers on my button which would

allow me to get a free personal pan pizza. She was always proud of me because I usually read the most books in the class. -Kevin

Reading for Action Figures

- "I can remember when I was in kindergarten the teacher wanted us to spell our whole names. That may not have been so bad for a kid with the last name of Smith, but for me with a last name of Kucharczyk it was no easy chore. My parents worked with me for at least a week on how to spell my name...When the day came along, my teachers were very surprised that I could even remember half of my last name, never mind the whole thing. I can remember this event so well because my parents were so proud of me that they went out and let me pick out a brand new He-Man figure. This was how my first major literary event went and boy was I proud. (Jeremy)

Ways of Reading

James Gleick who wrote, *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything*, might argue that "Book It" programs are right in line with our cultural zeitgeist. The very title "book it" alludes to the fast-paced quality of learning encouraged in these competitions. They cultivate a habit of being not unlike what Jeanette Winterson describes in her essay "Art Objects" when she says, "the public [art] gallery experience is one that encourages art at a trot" (7). Students, too, have been acclimated to expect their education "at a trot." Winterson explains that

“effort of time, effort of money, effort of study, effort of humility, effort of imagination...” are all “anathema to popular culture” (18).

Along similar lines, Jay Mechling argues in “The Collecting Self and American Youth Movements” (1989) that in the same way you could read museums and department stores at the turn of the century as American cultural texts that tell us something about adult rituals of accumulation, display, and consumption, we can look at American youth movements during these same years to show how American capitalism reproduces itself in the socialization of children (257). Mechling argues that although organizations like the Boy Scouts started with the best of intentions, they were founded on the “making, collecting and wearing of things” and this inevitably set up a materialistic relationship to the world (258). The strategy of building a child’s identity around the collecting of badges created the effect of producing a “collecting self” which “helped addict the child to the pursuit of consumer goods as a way of discovering and displaying one’s emerging identity (258).

A similar dynamic seems reproduced in well-intentioned motivational activities such as Read-a-thons and “Book-It” programs, funded in collaboration with libraries or businesses like Pizza Hut. In the manner that students narrate these experiences they’ve been coached to stress the ends over the means – the prize over intrinsic rewards one hopes comes in conjunction with words. The way Mechling concludes his essay is to argue that “only through play, ritual, art,

and related forms of communication..." can individuals "learn so-called healthy, normal approach to objects and how we think with them" (284). He shows that

Some children resisted the civilizing process, then as now...[but] the civilizing process for children meant trading their healthier, play-based relationships to objects for adult neurotic, materialistic relationships. This trade is but one way in which American civilization reproduces itself. (Mechling 285)

In the presence of these reading-for-prizes (or "good grade") narratives, it seems that grading doesn't leave space for "calling" to emerge. *I come back to this.*

3. Child Prodigy Narratives

A third central theme in a number of literacy histories is the presence of the child prodigy, illustrated by Lynne Sharon Schwartz in *Ruined By Reading*.

The world existed to be read and I read it. Diamond Crystal Kosher Coarse Salt on the cylindrical container my mother shook over simmering pots, and Reg. U.S. Pat. Off. on every box and can, had the rhythms of the pounding verses the bigger girls chanted on the street, twirling their jump ropes. *Before I knew who I was or what I could be, I became the prodigy, the 'reader.'* When friends visited, my father would summon me and hand me the *New York Times*, his finger aimed at the lead story. 'Read that.' I read, though those signs had no meaning. Sometimes the guests refused to be convinced, suspecting I had been coached like the big winners on radio quiz shows. So my father would invite them to test me with any article on any page. No four-year old could have memorized the entire paper. And while they marveled at my freakish achievement, which seemed to exist apart from my physical being, I could return to my paper dolls.

If my usefulness and value to my parents lay in this power to amaze, then I keep doing it. Reading was the ticket that entitled me to a place in the world. (Shwartz 18 italics added)

What characterizes these types of narratives are the ways literacy achievement is put on stage or marketed to “astonish” others. There is an element of spectacle to literacy, in which the selves being constructed become like automatons. The significance of these extraordinary, marvelous or unusual accomplishments are mined for their power as status symbols.

Examples of Child Prodigy Narratives From the Student Literacy Histories

Wonder Child

- I am four years old and sitting on my cousin’s bed with a dictionary upon my lap. Surrounding me is my mother, my aunt, my cousin T.J. and my other cousin, Lisa. Lisa flips through the pages and points to words. This is when I’m supposed to be saying the word. “Reinforcement” is the word she has picked. I say the word without difficulty. As Lisa flips through more pages I hear comments, “holy crap” from T.J. and “good job, Ellie” says Aunt Louise. I just look up at my mom with a look of half bewilderment, half excitement. She gives me back a smile and I know she is pleased cause I’m doing a good job. I have not been struck by lightening, yet I am a little smart for my age. My mom began to think I was a little genius when she caught me sneaking downstairs and rummaging through her boxes of adult books, only to sit and read them for hours out loud, or at least [trying]. But I guess I did a good job trying because soon she was making me read everything from her grocery list while I was sitting in the shopping carriage, to her recipes as she was cooking... When report card time came around my parents were always asked to come in. This was not because I had misbehaved but because I was so advanced. Full of check pluses, my excellent report card had no significance to me, but to my parents, especially my mom, it was just the thing they needed to call up their relatives and brag about. (Ellie)

Becoming a “Reading Machine”

- I taught myself how to read around the age of four. An old photograph in an album captures a moment when I was sitting on

the floor of my nursery, amidst the many scattered toys and dolls, with a book in my lap...My parents knew I could spell – my name, my brother's name, Mom, Dad, and a few other words but they were not aware of my reading capabilities. For some reason, I was quite secretive about my new-found ability. My parents, knowing I was a bright child, suspected I could read and often asked me to read to them. Each time, I would stubbornly refuse. After being pressured by my parents one too many times, I put my foot down and announced to them, "I will not read until I am five years old." I honestly don't recall what my little mind was thinking at the time, but the perfectionist that I am today, and the budding perfectionist that I was at age four, I assume I wanted to perfect my reading skills before reading to an audience. On my fifth birthday, I walked into the living room with a book in hand. I jumped up on the couch, snuggled in between my parents, opened the book and read it word for word, cover to cover. I made no mistakes. My parents were astonished. I quickly became a reading machine. (Alyssa)

Reading to Amaze

- ...I became interested in astronomy. I began to read everything about the stars. A lot of these books and essays were far above my reading level, but I made myself able to read them. My vocabulary became unusually high for my grade level, which was at the time about seventh grade, which amazed my parents. I would often explain some rather complex theoretical physics to my parents with full understanding of what I read. They still thought I was full of shit, even though I was conveying the opinions of brilliant physicists with total accuracy. (Riley)

Ways of Reading Child Prodigy Narratives

Words like "astonishment," "amazement," "bewilderment" come alongside these "prodigy" narratives. What strikes me is how little margin for error there is when students write such lines as, "I say the word [reinforcement] without difficulty" or "I made no mistakes," or I comprehended "with total accuracy." The focus here is on the approval of others, and the ability to offer

authorities “brag rights.” Sometimes I think these narratives are written in a slightly defensive posture by students who are a little intimidated by the first-year composition class. By presenting a flawless self they attempt to posit at least a textual version of the self that is untouchable and invincible, or at the very least—powerful. As I hinted it earlier, it may be that the presence of narratives like these signal a defensive and protective way to position the self against questioning or critique.

“Act As If” Narratives

I think “act as if” narratives are another way to read “child prodigy narratives.” By “Act As If” I mean to say that sometimes students “act as if” they’ve gained a certain prowess in their literacy or in their overall conception of self that may be a little ahead of where they actually are in their literate capabilities. They posit a slightly idealized self as a necessary step in living into the ideal. They posit a self “between the masks.”²³ “Act as If” narratives seem closely related to child prodigy narratives in the sense that the self is conceived as exceptional. Tobias Wolff’s memoir, *“This Boy’s Life”* offers one of the best and most fantastical examples of an “act as if” narrative. He describes a period in his life where he tries to be accepted into Choate’s prestigious prep school. In going through a series of steps to prepare to apply for prep school, Wolff studies Vance Packard’s, *The Status Seekers*:

²³ See Brunner, Diane DuBose. *Between The Masks: Resisting The Politics of Essentialism*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998.

This book explained how the upper class perpetuates itself. Its motive was supposedly democratic, to attack snobbery and subvert the upper class by giving away its secrets. But I didn't read it as social criticism. To seek status seemed the most natural thing in the world to me. Everyone did it. The people who bought the book were certainly doing it. They consulted it with the same purpose I had, not to deplore the class problem but to solve it by changing classes. (Wolff 194)

In a triumphant act of self-creation, Tobias Wolff steals fifty sheets of school letterhead, blank transcript forms and a stack of official envelopes and goes to work creating a self on paper that feels more real than the real him. He writes,

...the words came as easily as if someone were breathing them in my ear. I felt full of things that had to be said, full of stifled truth. That was what I thought I was writing—the truth. It was truth known only to me, but I believed in it more than I believed in the facts arrayed against it. I believed that in some sense not factually verifiable I was a straight-A student. In the same way, I believed that I was an Eagle Scout, and a powerful swimmer, and a boy of integrity. These were ideas about myself that I had held on to for dear life. Now I gave them voice. (Wolff 199)

He says, "I wrote...in the words my teachers would have used if they had known me as I knew myself...And on the boy who lived in their letters, the splendid phantom who carried all my hopes, it seemed to me I saw, at last, my own face" (Wolff 200).

What Gets Lost in the Rise To Success Convention

Stephen L. Fox addresses what gets lost in the uplift motif in his talk at the 4C's entitled, *"Memories of Play, Dreams of Success: Literacy Autobiographies of 101*

Students” when he observes that often early memories regard language “as a playful realm of adventure” characterized by the “intimate involvement between adults and children”(Fox 4). Wendy Atwell-Vasey in *Nourishing Words: Bridging Private Reading and Public Teaching* (1998) also addresses this conflict between private reading and public reading. She describes how “the lush word climate that sustains students in private life somehow turns into a thin rarefied school air” (2) and “that which drives language in all walks of life, *intention and desire*, is neglected and defended against in school” (3). My own students confirm this observation, over and over again, with stories charged with warmth and intimacy:

- My mother came in the family room with some hot cocoa and a book she was going to read to me before I went to bed, the title I later found out was *Big Joe*. (Tom)
- When I was young I spent my days outdoors. My days had no plan...but at nights my parents read to me. This is still very clear in my mind. I remember my parents reading to me on winter nights. My room had wooden floors which were cold on my bare feet, and a little sheepskin rug that was very soft. My bed was on the floor and my stuffed animals and books [were] on the built-in shelves my father had made for me. I would pick a book and cuddle between my parents. *The Long Winter* was one of my favorites. The owl said that a ring around the moon meant winter would be especially long and cold. My parents shut the light off as they left and the last thing I heard was the wooden stairs creaking as they went down. I looked out my window at the round moon to see if it had a ring. It didn't. (Mattie)

These are stories marked by the presence of loving, attentive parents who offer nourishment in the form of “hot cocoa,” imaginative stories and physical and emotional warmth. In the early years, reading is self-sponsored and imaginative

and it is reading conducted in relation to another person. And then, inevitably, the shift occurs in parental goals. Schools reinforce this shift in their linear forward-marching notion of literacy lessons that are divided up into hierarchical groups. Students remember the shift from storytelling to reading-for-evaluation with fear and trembling. Probably one of the best examples of this abrupt shift from reading at home to reading at school—is found in the “progression” that Max charts in his narrative, when he writes,

The earliest memories I have are of my grandmother sitting in the rocking chair in my room and reading me stories. She only came over about once every two or three weeks, but when she did, she would read for hours. When she read she would have a different voice for every character in her story. The dynamics of her reading alone could have kept my attention for hours.

Once I started attending school, and I learned how to read, my grandmother stopped reading to me...

I could read and understand all the information, but I could not move too fast or it would make no sense. The other children made fun of me, and I felt like I was doing a disservice to my grandmother...

I took a test at Shore, and I found out I had dyslexia...Shore was very exclusive, and they wanted to kick me out and send me to a different school...They made a deal where I could stay but I had to see a reading counselor at the Reading Center...

When I first met Dick, [the reading counselor] he told me to read a paragraph and copy it on to a piece of paper. I remember this took me a very long time. When I finished I expected to look at Dick and see a smile of approval. He told me that almost everything I did was wrong, he even told me that my writing was horrible. Then he gave me this triangle shaped piece of rubber that I had to use on my pencil so I would have “normal” hand posture while writing. I felt bad, but I thought I just had to work harder because I was the problem.

Max captures a rough passage from home to school culture—a transition I hear described in similar terms over and over in the literacy narratives. Lynn Worsham captures something of this shift from home to school culture in her essay, *“Emotion and Pedagogic Violence”* when she writes,

I want to return to what I think we already know but learn to forget—namely, that the discourse of emotion is our primary education (primary in the sense of earliest and foundational... if our commitment is to real individual and social change... then the work of decolonization must occur at the affective level... To be sure, our most urgent political and pedagogical task remains the fundamental reeducation of emotion. (Worsham 122)

When I think of Brook’s story, I think of the emotional connection and reverence he describes in the “dynamic” way his grandmother could make a story come to life, as well as her commitment to stay with him, to read for hours. This was “play” that was intellectually and emotionally sustaining. And then when he describes “Dick” the language shifts. He looks to his teacher for a “smile of approval” and he receives a multi-faceted rejection, a kind of pedagogical violence as Worsham names it. Max feels “the problem” (i.e. the speed in which he writes, his penmanship, and his physical hand posture) all reside within him. Instead of seeing a systemic problem, Max is made to feel that his is a personal failure. He can’t read fast enough, he can’t write “normally,” the Shore school makes him feel like he’s doing a disservice to their prestigious school, and, worse, he feels like he’s doing a “disservice” to his grandmother. There are layers and layers of perceived failure internalized.

Emotions are being educated.²⁴ I think in reading Max' narrative we can see an example of what Jerome Bruner describes in *The Culture of Education* (1996) that "a school's curriculum is not only about 'subjects.' The chief subject matter of school, viewed culturally, is school itself..." and so, "education does not stand alone...it exists in a culture. And culture, whatever else it is, is also about power, distinctions and rewards" (28). Max struggles to accommodate the new "literacy lessons" in school with an emphasis on speed and how fast he can read and on appearances and the way his writing appears on a page ("horrible") and with a binary system of assessment where one is either right, or in Max case, "wrong" which is then translated into the body, so that he has just written incorrectly, but he is wrong as a person. Max challenges the myth of literacy, that education, specifically training in literacy, should improve the quality of life for individuals and the culture at large" (Eldred and Mortensen 516). Instead, what he inherits from the start is a kind of mourning for a lost literacy. As Max says "at that time I did not view language as a way of expressing what I really think. I thought of it as something I had to do like running in gym class." He inherits a disaffective, unemotional, rote relation to reading that is assessed in terms of speed and appearance. And he is not alone. Many students write about how they should read "more" in the same way a dental hygienist says you should floss every day.

²⁴ See also Jaggar, Alison M. "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology" in *GENDER/BODY/KNOWLEDGE: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989: 145-171.

There seems to be a similar correlation between flossing as prevention of tooth decay and reading as inoculation from moral decay.

Max experiences a “pedagogy [that] organizes and limits the vocabulary of emotion... especially to those in subordinate positions, it teaches an inability to adequately apprehend and name their affective lives” (127). This is what Lynn Worsham calls “the primary violence” (127). In this narrative we see what Lynn Worsham describes as goal of pedagogical work, which “...is the transmission of knowledge appropriate to the position of an individual in a hierarchy of social relations that reproduces the authority of the dominant group and sustains its continued legitimacy” (125). Max learns that there isn’t room to have a learning disability at the prestigious Shore school, esteemed for their students talents and achievements. He is accepted only grudgingly, and only on the periphery of the central curriculum. He learns to feel “bad” about himself and to try to “work harder.”

Success

In re-reading the narratives, I am troubled that the sub-text of so many of these histories is that the writer’s first sense of self is fueled by an understanding that one needs to be made “new and improved.” Students often internalize a widespread belief in their intrinsic deficits (and it is a multi-faceted deficit—lacking experience, intellectual acumen, wisdom, and fluency in the English language). I think students learn the lesson well that who they are is not good enough. They’ve grown-up surrounded by the rhetoric of “*A Nation At Risk*”

which declares “the educational foundations of [this] society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very nation...” (*A Nation At Risk* 5). They know they must always be refining, reworking and re-fashioning the self to be more culturally productive and acceptable. They’re culturally constructed to posit a self that needs to be filled up.

Perhaps they borrow from the wider culture, from the pervasive discourse of psychotherapy. Psychotherapy posits a version of “the empty self” in need of “self-liberation through consumption” — a thesis Philip Cushman puts forth in his book *Constructing the Self, Constructing America: A Cultural History of Psychotherapy* (1995). Cushman shows that “when social artifacts or institutions are taken for granted it usually means that they have developed functions in the society that are so integral to the culture that they are indispensable, unacknowledged and finally invisible” (1). The assumptions of many of psychotherapy’s theories go unquestioned, “such as the underlying ideology of self-contained individualism or the valuing of ‘inner’ feelings or the unquestioned assumption that health is produced by experiencing and expressing those feelings” (2). Cushman states that “Psychotherapy is permeated by the philosophy of self-contained individualism, [it] exists within the framework of consumerism, speaks the language of self-liberation, and thereby unknowingly reproduces some of the ills it is responsible for healing” (6).

In *The Private Death of Public Discourse* (1998) Barry Sanders goes so far as to say we “cultivate renegades” in America. Sanders creates the tension-filled landscape that is mirrored so well in student literacy narratives. He writes,

Imagine now the American self, cut out of religious cloth, encouraged by the Church to restraint, but propelled in the opposite direction by the ethic of work, and particularly by the engine of capitalism, toward total assertion, in unrelenting pursuit of success. Situate this self in a young country with seemingly endless borders, boundless ingenuity, and a limitless appetite for whatever smacks of the new: Progress! In America, the self is not only continually tantalized but downright encouraged to fill itself out to its capacity – and beyond.

Once the self had been set in motion, no amount of success could satisfy its need, or quell its drive. (Sanders 67)

Pursuing “Hints”

It is the difference between...improvisation and compulsion, a hint or an order, curiosity and habit.

– Adam Phillips, *The Beast in the Nursery*

These literacy-as-accumulation stories seem to expose the possibility of receiving what Adam Phillips calls “hints.” James Hillman’s *The Soul’s Code* and Adam Phillips *The Beast in the Nursery* both address the ways culture act on individuals in conflicting and contradictory ways. Hillman takes a Jungian approach and Phillips a revisionary Freudian approach, but both writers examine the ways children are discouraged from following their inclinations, pursuing “hints” or what Nietzsche called “the haphazard, unaccountable, intent project of a life” (Phillips 148). Phillips explains,

It was Freud’s ambition that psychoanalysis should become a science, with all the prestige and cultural authority that entailed. But the dreamer and the child, as he described them, kept reminding him

that there were other ways of doing things. In Freud's allegory the modern individual is the site for this conflict between the dreamer and the scientist, between the child and the realist, between the beast and the nursery. (149-50)

Adam Phillip's idea in *The Beast in the Nursery* is that a student's "official education [can] extinguish their unofficial education" and put another way, "It is not always enlivening to be well-informed..." (31) What seems to be missing is a sense of "literacy and intimacy, language and play, words and joy" (Fox). Linda Brodkey's essay, "*Writing on the Bias*" seems to address this same issue. The title "*Writing on the Bias*" refers to Brodkey's mother's sewing. She notices when her mother sews she is thoroughly at ease because she is creating (544). 167).

Brodkey writes,

...that I write as my mother sewed probably explains why I take a good deal more obvious pleasure in the intellectual work of being an academic than those of my peers who have difficulty believing writing to be real work. If I enjoy the labor of writing, that can at least in part be explained by my writing as my mother sewed. She made clothes. I make prose.
(Brodkey 545)

I think students need to be encouraged to pursue "hints" or inclinations or some passionate "bias" of the sort that Brodkey describes when she remembers her mother's hand-sewn clothing or when she describes the bias that directs her writing. Brodkey says "most students have learned rules that readers rather than writers believe govern prose" (546). She says,

They have not been taught what every writer knows, that one writes on the bias or not at all. A bias may be provided by a theory or an experience or an image or an ideology. Without a bias, however,

language is only words as cloth is only threads. To write is to find words that explain what can be seen from an angle of vision.(546)

I think the “rise to success” conventional way of viewing literacy histories makes me especially clear about my goals as a writing teacher—I want to create wide-open spaces for experimentation in different forms of writing (collage, montage, crots, double-voiced texts etc.), to counteract the need to be flawless or brilliant right out of the chute. And I want to teach “writing on the bias” or writing that allows students to pursue their own inclinations.

Chapter 5: Transgressive Narratives – Resisting the Prevailing Culture of School

In fourth grade, I took a turn for the worse, I limited...my scholastic activities to reading choose-your-own-adventure books...I would check large numbers of these books out, then read them while I was supposed to be paying attention in class, by placing them in my desk where I could see. I cannot remember most of that year of school.

—Jeff, a literacy narrative

To see the angel in the malady requires an eye for the invisible...It is impossible to see (intuition) unless you first have a notion of it; otherwise the child is simple, stupid, willful or pathological.

—James Hillman, *The Soul's Code*

CLOSE TO HOME



I am continually made conscious of students' wide repertoire of transgressive behaviors or "ways-out" of assigned activity. A transgression is an act or an instant or a process. To transgress means to violate or to go over a limit or boundary. Like the figure in this cartoon who stands beneath the sign that says "no shirt, no shoes, no service!" (while wearing only a shirt and shoes)—students often obey the letter of the law in school, but not the spirit of the law. They hold on to a resistant, sometimes playful aspect of the self that simply refuses to conform to prescribed activity.

There are as many examples of students resisting the prevailing culture of school as there are students. Here I'll focus on "moments" of transgression as they're narrated in the literacy histories. I'll also point to a narrative about rugby that came to me as a literacy narrative although the paper seems to be a response to an entirely different assignment altogether. These moments that seem "*contrary to rule*" can teach us something about our work as teachers. And, I've found, if I cultivate a certain elastic, curious, questioning frame of mind, transgressive moments on the page and in the lived moment of a classroom experience can provide "an illicit pleasure," —in the right frame of mind I can appreciate "the calculated disrespect" (Newkirk 63). It beats student boredom. It signals some kind of wild energy or good fight. It's energy that can be put to good use.

Jeff (epigraph) is a skate boarder and a rap enthusiast, whose parents were a large presence in his literacy narrative, nudging, supporting and encouraging him to read and write. When I read these lines I'm struck by Jeff's savvy perception of juggling two realities. He writes about the "joy of an active adventure and [his] first taste at role-playing" and how he read these books covertly in class when he was expected to pay attention. He cultivates what Susannah Kaysen calls "a parallel universe" in *Girl, Interrupted* (6). In the parallel universe, activity often goes both unnoticed and is unsanctioned, happening simultaneously while sanctioned activities are occurring. This scene from Jeff's narrative reminds me what I've always known: that there are often layers and

layers of *underlife* activity going on in a classroom space beyond what I could ever control or know.

The epigraph to this chapter captures just a moment from Jeff's literacy narrative, a single isolated instance of student resistance to the established "lesson plan." I'd like to begin here because it's emblematic of so many other scenes I read where students describe creating pockets of time in school, in the midst of institutionally programmed activity, for their own self-sponsored (unsanctioned) "work." I feel heartened when I stumble across mischievous scenes like this one because they signal a kind of resilient life-force that has always been attractive to me. Receiving "transgressive" moments in text-form, removed from the immediacy of my own classroom, helps to make these scenes more palpable. It doesn't feel like an attack in the same way it does when this kind of active and passive resistance is going on *during* my class. Consequently, I am able to step back to reflect on what these transgressive incidents in school may say about certain educational structures and certain student motives and ambitions.

There is a striking dialectical tension embedded in Jeff's prose—a tension between words like "worse," "limited," "negatively," and "supposed to," words that suggest the tension he feels ducking his obligation to the class with words like "discovered," "joy," "active adventure," and "role-playing" on the other end of the dialectic. It's interesting that he sees this exciting time of "choose-your-own-adventure" stories as a fall from grace. He doesn't celebrate the self-

sponsored learning and motivation required to check out “large numbers” of library books (a teacher’s dream), but rather focuses on the fact that in reading these stories, on the sly, with books propped up in the belly of his desk, out of view, he consequently missed many of “the lessons” and remembers virtually nothing from the fourth grade. If Jeff is “acting out” in this moment of reading in class on the sly, what role is he acting out of? And what new role emerges? I wonder what we can learn about the power of institutional spaces to shape individuals and the power of individuals to resist the institutional program? In looking back over the literacy narrative, I wonder if it isn’t wise to consciously highlight moments of resistance as evidence of a curious self. I don’t mean to glamorize “transgressive” behavior, so much as to question what undergirds these acts of resistance. As Peter McLaren suggests in *Rituals of Schooling*, I wonder if there aren’t ways to “...critically engage students at the level of their own cultural literacy. The formations of popular youth culture, in all their complexity, radical variousness, and subterranean potency, must be seen as valuable by the teacher but must not be unqualifiedly endorsed” (257). I want to align my views with Goffman who argues “that any group of persons...develop a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable, and normal, once you get close to it.” I feel more rewarded when I lean into the moments of student parody or resistance than when I try to look away. It takes so much energy to look away. On my better, stronger days, I begin with the assumption that the

resistance I sense from an individual in the class is “meaningful, reasonable and normal” and I try to re-see the work of the class through this frame.

Three Teacher’s Stories of Student Transgression

...as agents in our own construction, we choose among available cultural stories, apply them to our experiences, sometimes get stuck in a particularly strong metanarrative, often operate within contradictory implied narratives, and sometimes seek stories that transgress the culturally cordoned ones.

— Peter J. Rabinowitz *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation*.

I’ve always had a curious fascination with instances of student rebellion — in films, in the life of my own classrooms, in the stories I hear told by teachers talking in the hallways or in staff meetings. “Transgression” is just another word for “resistance,” really — it “most commonly refers to a general opposition to authority, a student’s opposition to pedagogical authority and, especially, a writer’s opposition to discursive conventions” (Heilker 206). I look to other teachers who are not afraid of these moments of transgressive behavior but who regard them as “teachable instants.” I look to others who regard resistance “as more than a capricious quest for novelty” but who regard resistance as pointing to something deeper (McLaren 256). Lad Tobin in *Writing Relationships*, Bob Connors, in “*Teaching and Learning as a Man*,” and Michelle Payne in “*Rendering Womens’ Authority in the Writing Classroom*” are three such examples of teacher/researchers who take the risk to narrate scenes of student resistance.

They touch on issues of “power and authority, identification and resistance, negotiation and compromise” or the *complete lack thereof* (Tobin 7). They work to bring to life certain indelible instants that leave scars for teachers and perhaps for the students as well. I’ll introduce these stories because they act as a crucial backdrop for my reading of similar instances encountered in students’ literacy narratives.

In Bob Connors’ essay, *“Teaching and Learning As A Man,”* a student described as “one of the guys” makes a big show of slam-dunking his journal on the last day of the writing class, but only after hearing that he’d received a good grade. The scene seems to capture something of what Alan France observes, that “narratives of literacy...are marked by a tension between Foucauldian determinism and human agency, showing the power of institutions to control people by controlling their literacy and the power of individuals to act either in concert with or in opposition to this power.” The curve ball for Connors is that this particular male student “was not sullen or challenging” and he came to conferences and “was pleasant and docile” (137) and this final act of open rebellion showed Connors “how little he cared for my opinion about his ‘improvement’ as a writer” (138).

In *“Rendering Women’s Authority in the Writing Classroom”* Michelle Payne recalls an incident in her first-year writing classroom with a student named “Kyle,” an

eighteen-year-old journalism student who had begun the course by asking whether other sections were taught more 'traditionally' than it seemed mine would be, [and who] had spent time in class...trying to read a novel despite my presence next to him" (Payne 98-99).

She describes the tension she feels trying to decentralize her authority as the teacher in the classroom, while needing a very centered, clear, strong authority to combat this kind of resistance. Like Connors, she describes "the growing anger" she feels "at apathetic students, an anger she traces back to her belief that success as a teacher means "reaching everyone" (101).

In *Writing Relationships*, Lad Tobin describes Steve in his classroom in this way,

He never said a word in class unless I called on him directly. And even then he always answered in a way that indicated that he didn't think much of my question. He always sat at the last desk in the semicircle, pushed up against the wall. He had cultivated, even perfected, the minimalist style that some teenagers adopt when they are forced against their will and mental health to spend time with adults, especially adults in authority. (7)

"Steve" goes on to write a paper which seems to contain thinly veiled fictional representations of Tobin and the student which seemed to represent "some fairly ugly racist and ethnic stereotypes," all of which lead Tobin to write:

I thought about how all the things I needed to know right then I never learned in kindergarten — or in graduate school for that matter. I didn't remember Strunk and White's dealing with any of this and a Flower and Hayes protocol analysis seemed out of the question. (11, 14)

Brought together, all three of these essays create a dialogue about certain students memorable for the way they challenge our pedagogy or our personhood, as well as those moments in teaching when we suddenly realize, in the face of some sort of resistance, that we don't have everything figured out. All three teachers react differently: one responds humorously, one responds angrily and one responds with searching analysis. I think they reveal three quintessential teacher responses in the face of student resistance: humor, anger, and analysis. In the story Tobin tells, he relies on a particular humorous narration to relieve some of the discomfort he experienced with his student writer. Connors registers anger in reflecting on one particular scene with one of his students, first through name-calling "The bastard. The bootlicking brown-noser. The disrespectful little twit" and then he moves to thoughts of revenge, "I wanted to show him. I wanted to make him toe the line. I wanted — for his sake, of course! — to teach him that fleering the teacher is bad policy, son" (Connors 138). What strikes me in re-reading their narratives in light of my students' stories is how they set up a kind of condensed version of Elizabeth Kubler Ross's stages of grieving: first I create humor, second, I create anger, and third I create analysis to attempt to theorize *why* this is happening and *how* to proceed.

Excerpts of Transgressive Moments From Students' Literacy Histories:

As we study the forms of our experience, not only are we searching for evidence of the external forces that have diminished us; we are also recovering our own possibilities.

#1 "My Attempts At Failing Failed."

- My passion for reading and writing, however, died when I entered the dreaded period of adolescence and junior high school...

School is Cool

I love school,
it's really cool,
the classes are all wonderful,
school lunches always leave me full.
Getting up early is always fun,
I love to do it,
so does everyone.
Classes are all so exciting,
the students are nice, they are never fighting.
I never want the day to end,
but I know tomorrow it'll happen again.
Oh! There's just one thing I forgot,
to all those things I've just said—NOT!

—Jessica, age 13

Being a teenager is tough. It is especially tough when you have been labeled "gifted and talented" by school administrators and are excused from class each day to work on special projects intended to expand your mind and ways of thinking. The humiliation I felt being excused from the middle of class was excruciatingly painful. All of the other kids knew where I was going—to the classroom for the "smart kids." I could picture them in my mind whispering behind my back, "She thinks she's so smart." I desperately wanted to fit in. I did not want to be smart anymore. For this reason, I tried to resist my "Gifted and Talented" coordinator and intentionally tried to get bad grades. I wanted out of the program, so I stopped doing my homework, refused to participate in class and pretended not to know the answers to questions. I wanted my teacher to think I was stupid. I wanted her to tell me I didn't have to come to class anymore.

My attempts at failing failed, and I was subjected to hours of tortuous reading and discussions. Shakespeare, Tolkien, Hemingway. To a thirteen year old girl trying to appear average, it was complete

agony. I hated it. Every minute of it. I wanted to be like everyone else, I did not want special treatment—I did not want to be smart.

Despite my unenthusiastic approach to writing, I continued to get “A’s” on my work. I found this amusing. I did not have to put effort into any of my work and I would still find an “Outstanding!” in big red letters...I quickly perfected the art of “bullshitting.” It was this fantastic way to write that gave teachers the impression I had spent a lot of time thinking about and working on a paper, when, in fact, I hadn’t. I could get good grades without investing any of my time or thoughtfulness. Being successful at bullshitting gave me a feeling of invincibility. I felt I could outwit any teacher. I carried this skill into high school with me and used it to my advantage many many times. (Jessica)

#2 “Reading Stories Under My Desk”

- In fifth grade, I remember my teacher giving us a reading chapter test before we’d covered the chapter. Those of us who passed it were allowed to go do reading projects in the back of the room, without having to do what the class was doing. If we missed a section of the test, when it was covered, we had to go back to the class and learn it with them. I was the only person who never missed a section. I lived in the *Chronicles of Prysdain*, *The Gammage Cup*, and *A Wrinkle in Time*. I was also introduced to Susan Cooper’s, *The Dark is Rising* quintet and *Goodnight Mr Tom*, by Michelle Magorian. I was absolutely furious when the school’s vice principal made my teacher cancel the program. It meant that I had to go back and sit through stultifying, boring lessons on things I already knew. On top of that I couldn’t, and still can’t, understand how that reading program was any different from the school’s Gifted and Talented program. Two days a week we’d leave the class and go to a different teacher who would supervise us while we worked on our own little projects. After the reading program was canceled, I ended up reading stories under my desk, or surreptitiously reading several chapters ahead in the English book. (Maura)

#3 Staying “Faithful To Television”

- Deep within my mind literacy has always been associated with the ability to read and write powerful pieces of literature. To be literate is to be an effective writer, and a constant reader. Books,

essays, research papers, and other such items would be an example of tools used by the truly literate individual.

Television on the other hand, has always seemed to be the complete antithesis of anything remotely literate. I believe I've always felt it better to be literate, yet I've stayed faithful to television as though it were my true love. If I felt books to be of more value, why did I cling to television? The answer is simple. First of all, from the faintest glow of my earliest childhood memory, television was always there. When reading finally came along, it was too little, too late. My mind had been trained for instant gratification. Reading had no sound, no picture, why on earth would I waste my time with it when television was but a fingertip away? As my childhood wore on, this lingering threat of the importance of literacy would always be dancing in a dark way in the back of my head. I tip-toed through high school, accomplishing all the assigned reading and writing projects that were thrown at me. I did them solely for the purpose of the grades. I gave no thought to deriving enjoyment from these tasks, that was television's job. No great novel turned my life around. No thought provoking writing assignments opened my mind to the pleasure and importance of reading. I'd reach this revelation the hard way.

(Later)

Second semester I was put in three classes with quite a bit of required reading, so I felt this would help me get back into the habit. I felt very guilty for abandoning the books like a condemned house first semester. Reading was a constant supply of knowledge I wanted to have in my life. My television-bred instincts conflicted with my desire to read. Unfortunately, second semester television regained control in this epic struggle. Much like high school, I read what was assigned and moved on with my life. I've begun watching a solid amount of T.V. with my friends each and everyday. I see this wavering between taking the easy way out (watching T.V.) and bettering myself (reading and writing) as a necessary step towards someday being a well-read person. I'm confident that as I mature reading will outlast television. My regard for reading is too high for it not to. I've already got plans to read like mad this summer. (Mick)

Ways Of Reading

Tedium overtook me in my school years...someone in authority always commanded my attention and presence. The time was so constructively filled, one obligation slid smoothly into another, that I couldn't escape my own mind until bedtime.

— Robert MacNeil, *Wordstruck*

These three examples range widely in terms of the kinds of transgressive behavior displayed. Jess's transgression stems from feeling "humiliated" by the "excruciating pain" of being singled out as "smart." Her resistance takes the form of intentionally trying to get bad grades. One of the ways students know to follow the letter of the law, but not the spirit of the law, is to "bullshit" — "a fantastic way to write that gave teachers the impression I had spent a lot of time thinking about and working on a paper, when, in fact, I hadn't. I could get good grades without investing any time or thoughtfulness" (Maura).

Maura, like Jeff, practices "reading under the desk" as a way out of the "stultifying, boring lessons on things I already knew." And Mick's resistance, as he describes it, is "abandoning books like a condemned house." He likens his story of literacy to an epic battle waged between books and T.V. He described tip-toeing through high school by completing "all the assigned reading and writing projects that were thrown at [him]." I've been led to question the ways students describe external forces diminish their sense of self, and the ingenuous ways they find to recover their own sense of possibility.

#4 A Rugby Narrative or Literacy Narrative or Both?

If you define yourself by the language you acquire as you enter different spheres, cricket was another piece of my self-definition.

— Robert MacNeil, *Wordstruck* 120

From time to time, students submit writing that veers so wildly away from my intentions for a particular assignment that I feel like I've stepped into the wrong class. One narrative in particular that comes to mind is an essay submitted as a literacy narrative on the subject of rugby. I remember I went through all three stages of emotions that Tobin, Connors and Payne highlight: humor, anger, and analysis. The essay begins, "*Running full blast as I carried the egg-shaped leather rugby ball, an opponent intercepted my knees and sent my top half toward the deck in a spasmodic arc stopped by the ever-present ground.*"

My first response to this text was not my best response. The voice in my head at that time is best described as "grouchy, prissy, [and] moralistic" (Tobin in *Elements of Alternative Style* 44). I held a sarcastic dialogue in my head (sounding a little like "Church Lady" on Saturday Night live) "what part of this paper addresses the prompt about literacy?" My second response was to go talk to somebody else. I talked to Cindy Gannett who referred me to a really moving part of Robert MacNeil's *Wordstruck* where MacNeil recalls learning the art and sport of cricket. He recreates the culture of the team on the field with its distinct discourse community using words like: *googlies* (balls with deceptive spin), *sticky wickets* (damp pitches that take spin bowling), and *stone-walling* (batsman who

play extra defensively) (MacNeil 120). After reading MacNeil I re-read "*Running Straight On*" and what I noticed on a second reading surprised me. Playing Elbow's "believing game,"²⁵ it suddenly became easy to see rugby as a literacy which requires the terms of the game—and the means and ways of communicating on the field. I still read the essay as an act of resistance and as a challenge of sorts to me, but I also started to read for the physicality of the sport, "bodies piled on top" of bodies, and for the good-natured ribbing, "Your momma likes J.D. on the rocks," and for the "plow on" philosophy of the sport, "Stuff happens fast in rugby. Rugby's kind of scary. That makes it harder to think. One way of coping with this is to not think at all. One thing our coach always told us was he'd never criticize a man who ran the ball forward."

And finally, I started to read for the ethic that emerged from the group's effort, "there are no stars in rugby...No one player has ever won or lost the game. There are too many elements that need to be solved by the whole. No one person can play at all the positions." In my mind what this student does in this "literacy narrative" is to "create a new discourse and politics of self-affirmation, one that provides [him] with the metalingual ability to destabilize the 'text' of instruction" (McLaren 256). He makes me see my own narrow perception in terms of the scope of literacy. His "embodied" literacy narrative leads me to see

²⁵ In Elbow's believing game you start by believing all assertions (148) and Elbow says, "The function of a good critic, then, is not to discredit a bad reading but to make better readings more available. A good reading is like a good lens. You don't so much see 'it' as see through it to more of the text" (166).

my own bias toward written texts. In the final reading, I come to want to celebrate the way the student is able to blend “streetcorner knowledge (bodily knowledge)” with “*knowledge*” (analytic exposure to facts and empirical instruction” (McLaren 256).

Seeing Is Never Simple

...seeing is never simple, and the lenses through which many teachers view the young these days tend to distort who, and how, our students really are.

—Parker Palmer, “A Culture of Fear: Education and the Disconnected Life” in *The Courage To Teach*

One intriguing way to address the issue of student resistance is to make transgressive narratives the central text of his classroom which is what Donald Rothman does in “*Caliban in the Composition Classroom.*” Rothman looks at stories of “those who have put their lives on the line by writing” so that students “better understand the silences our schools have imposed on them” (121). He begins his essay by pointing to Shakespeare’s Caliban, a character who haunts him “whenever [he] thinks of literacy and censorship, students and teachers, slaves and masters” (120). He quotes the following lines from *The Tempest*, to argue that “our schools and universities often silence students who eventually internalize this institutionalized censorship” (121).

MIRANDA: I pitied thee,
Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour
One thing or other...

CALIBAN: You taught me language; and my profit on’t

Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language! (1.2.355-57, 365-67)

CALIBAN: Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twanging instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices,
That, if I then had wak'd after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open, and show riches
Ready to drop upon me; that, when I wak'd, I cried to dream
again. (3.2.133-41)

For Rothman, Caliban's speeches serve as a metaphor for his students' writing.

He argues,

Caliban, in the presence of Miranda, his teacher, uses language to curse; but, in the ill-fated plot for his own revenge and liberation, he speaks what are, to me, the most beautiful lines in the play. Away from his master, where he feels a considerable sense of control, he expresses a profound appreciation of beauty, of himself, and of those around him. (120)

I align myself with Rothman in his effort to help student writers to see the writing they do in a larger context. He explains,

When they read writers who have been explicitly censored, their works banned, their lives threatened, my students find more intelligible their own histories as writers and the pervasive sense of inadequacy that accompanies writing for them. And the colonial fiction that we read can help us avoid the naïve belief that literacy in and of itself will be liberating. (Rothman 126)

For this class, they read, Eduardo Galeano's *"In Defense of the Word,"* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart, They Shoot Writers, Don't They?* edited by George Theiner, and Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, "...as an example of insensitive distortion of American students' lives" (123).

I want to acknowledge the difficulty of confronting transgressive behavior both on the page and in the life of the classroom but also to suggest that, from time to time, resistance is a potential gold mine. It's so easy to mis-read students. We're wise to play both sides of what Peter Elbow calls the cycle of "doubting" and "believing." Doubts are easy and they float to the surface so quickly in a number of guises: as anger, or humor, or as critical analysis. "Believing" is a crucial next step that requires something more—"great energy, attention, and even a kind of inner commitment" but from time to time, as in the case with the student who writes the rugby narrative, it leads to better results (Elbow 149).

Chapter 6: Stigma Narratives and “Spoiled” Identities

Can trauma instruct pedagogy, and can pedagogy shed light on the mystery of trauma?...Can the process of testimony – that of bearing witness to a crisis or a trauma – be made use of in the classroom situation?

—Shoshana Felman, “Education and Crisis: Or The Vicissitudes of Teaching, in *Trauma and Pedagogy*

FROM time to time, students mention feeling “marked” by sometimes small, but no less traumatic, instances in school. Because literacy instruction involves language at its heart and because language is inextricably bound up with one’s sense of self, when one uses language incorrectly or when one’s reading is called into question, so too is one’s sense of self. Literacy histories seem to house a number of these instances of trauma, or what Erving Goffman calls “stigma.”²⁶ By “stigma” Goffman refers to any attribute that is “deeply discrediting” (3). What constitutes “deeply discrediting” is worth investigating. Students narrate stories of being reformed (in both senses of the word) by what Erving Goffman calls “spoiled identities.” Put bluntly, he theorizes that “we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we

²⁶ In this chapter I use Erving Goffman’s study, *STIGMA: Notes on The Management of Spoiled Identity*. NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963.

exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if unthinkingly, reduce his life chances" (Goffman 5).

In an essay "*The Way Smart People Do*," (Fall 2000) Patricia Foster recalls feeling stigmatized by a one sentence comment from a seventh-grade English teacher. The teacher says, "'You, I remember, were timid. Oh, I could see you were smart, but sometimes you didn't act the way smart people do" (73). What is so remarkable about these words is the way the student is marked with a "spoiled identity" and the way, as an adult woman, she still feels the words in her body. She (like so many of my students) describes her visceral reaction,

My face grows hot. The violets on her windowsill turn a brighter shade of purple. I feel a familiar quivering of fury, a clutch at the heart. *Didn't act the way smart people do*. What girl is she talking about? I see myself at age twelve counting my notebooks, stacking my books the day before school, sharpening my pencils, this girl who loves the dry, whispery feel of chalk, who hates the antiseptic odor of the GIRLS bathroom, who still remembers this woman's familiar voice barking, 'Chill-ren,' her breath slightly acidic from the onions in the potato salad at lunch, 'today we're going to learn the sub-junc-tive!' And yet for a single instant I am that twelve-years-old kid again, frizzy-haired and anxious, my head lifted with the startled hope of approval. (74)

I think this may be considered a case of what McLaren in *Schooling as a Ritual Performance* calls "enfleshment" where "social relations become 'inscribed' upon actors" producing a "culture of pain" (McLaren 296). This writer feels her identity as "spoiled" by this former teacher's reading of her; she's given a *virtual social identity* as opposed to what she considers her *actual social identity* and the virtual identity (i.e the one that "doesn't act like smart people") leaves her

scrambling with a more unsettled sense of self. Patricia Foster's essay moves quickly from this scene of stigmatization into a kind of "Approval Narrative" where she describes trying to win others approval. She writes,

I knew that being smart meant being a success, and I'd honed success down to a predictable formula: success is work, work is sacrifice, sacrifice is a denial of pleasure, pleasure is rewarded for success. And thus, the corollary: without success there is no pleasure." (75)

A lot seems to hinge on a student's ability to manage a real or perceived stigma. Given the ways students tend to narrate instances of stigmatization, it seems at times the fate of their educational life ends up hanging in the balance. Often, although these incidents seem small in the large scheme of things, (and they include such things as being asked to read aloud, being signaled out in a public classroom dialogue, being placed in a lower reading group, or receiving a diminishing assessment in terms of general "competencies"), these crucial moments end up becoming THE metaphor for the students' perceptions of their educational careers. They're worth studying for the ways they leave lasting emotional scars. Judy Page Heitzman in her poem "*The Schoolroom on the Second Floor of the Knitting Mill*," movingly illustrates the lasting effects of feeling stigmatized,

**The Schoolroom on the Second Floor
of the Knitting Mill**

While most of us copied letters out of books,
Mrs. Lawrence carved and cleaned her nails.

Now the red and buff cardinals at my back-room window
make me miss her, her room, her hallway,
even the chimney outside
that broke up the sky.

In my memory it is afternoon.
Sun streams in through the door
next to the fire escape where we are lined up
getting our coats on to go out to the playground,
the tether ball, its towering height, the swings.
She tells me to make sure the line
does not move up over the threshold.
That would be dangerous.
So I stand guard at the door.
Somehow it happens
the way things seem to happen when we're not really looking,
or we are looking, just not the right way.
Kids crush up like cattle, pushing me over the line.

Judy is not a good leader is all Mrs. Lawrence says.
She says it quietly. Still, everybody hears.
Her arms hang down like sausages.
I hear her every time I fail. (Heitzman 957)

Again, as in the poem "*Contrary To Rule*" the teacher constructs the term "dangerous" and we see the effect this conceptual idea has in the life of the student. We see, as Shoshana Felman writes, that "'a life-testimony is not simply a testimony to a private life, but a point of conflation between text and life, a textual testimony which can *penetrate us like an actual life*" (2). "Judy," is disciplined by being signaled out in front of her peers, when she hears the proclamation from above that she "*is not a good leader.*" She is what Goffman calls the "fully and visibly stigmatized" since she "must suffer the special indignity of knowing that [she] wears [her] situation on her sleeve" because "everybody" hears the teacher's judgment.

In this chapter I'd like to take up a question first posed by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *Getting A Life* and that is "how and to what extent do autobiographical subjects oscillate between the narratives that write them and those they reconfigure in their local and strategic interventions?" (21).

Reading literacy narratives with an eye for these moments that mark a traumatic encounter or that signal some sort of stigmatization, both teachers and students share an opportunity to reconfigure the writer's sense of self because the text can act as "strategic intervention." The student discovers that writing is a "representation of experience" and she can start to think in terms of having a moveable and elastic subjectivity, while also discovering her own story provides "a stance, a perspective, an angle, [a] version, [and a] representation" (Summerfield 187). In becoming more conscious as teachers (and students) of the ways learners experience trauma in school, students can learn to overcome the common "elision of failure in English with failed identity" and they can come to read their sense of failure as "produced, rather than natural" (Kamler 90, 87).

Seizing The Occasion

...autobiographical narrators become agents in and of the story...agents of their own ordering imperative. Seizing the occasion and telling the story turn speakers into subjects of narrative who can exercise some control over the meaning of their 'lives.'

—Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Getting A Life*.

I'll point to four brief moments of stigma in student literacy narratives and then offer "Ways of Reading." I turn to both fiction: Ben Anastas's novel, *An*

Underachiever's Diary (a published example of a "spoiled" identity) and the sociological work of Erving Goffman in *STIGMA: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, to help me to read these narratives. I argue, that as teachers, we need to be especially conscious and reflective about our own pedagogical practices so as to minimize the possibility of creating the type of setting that lends itself to these types of emotional and intellectual ruptures in confidence. And I end with a case study of Gail, one student in particular, who titles her literacy narrative "*Invisible*" and who writes in great detail about the power relations in the English classroom and how she feels marked by a "spoiled identity" (Appendix). Working along similar lines as Barbara Kamler in *Relocating The Personal: A Critical Writing Pedagogy*, I attempt "to take account of the processes by which [this student] had acquired a failing student *habitus* (Bourdieu 1990) — the ways of talking, acting and moving, the ways of constructing reality and social relations, which marked her as different, as failure — and to reflect on these processes and their effects.

Highlighting a Dialectic of Then and Now

...living a childhood and writing about it as an adult are fundamentally different experiences, but the value of autobiography is that it creates forms of embodied knowledge in which the (adult) self and the (child) other can rediscover and reaffirm their connectedness.

— Ruth Behar, "The Girl in The Cast" in *The Vulnerable Observer*

Moments of Stigma from the literacy narratives:

#1.

- Third grade meant Miss Petticord. She and I clashed from the start. As she went through the roster on the first day, she stumbled with my name. "Elizabeth Allen? Or is it Elizabeth White? Is one a middle name?" "No." My cheeks were hot from being singled out. "Allen-White is all my last name. My mom wanted me to keep her maiden name." "Oh, well. Never heard of that before!" The class did one of those unified giggles. Petticord continued with the list as I tried not to cry. (Elizabeth)

#2

- When I was in grammar school I didn't have the literacy necessary to participate fully. There was a class that was separate from everything else, it was simply called "Reading Class." There were textbooks for this class, and the textbooks were sectioned off into different short stories. Because people read at different levels the teachers set up three different reading groups. Group A was the elite group, they were the top of the line readers and there were only about four or five students in this group. Then came group B, these were the students that had an average reading ability, this group had about 20 students in it. Then there was group C. This was the group I was in. We were the underachievers or that's the way I felt. I was in this reading group from the first grade all the way to the fourth grade. There were only about 4 or 5 children in this group. I felt like an outcast. I remember feeling very stupid. They would call group A and the few proud individuals would get up. They would call group B, and pretty much the rest of the class, including all of my friends would get up. Then they called group C and the last few stragglers would get up. Everyone knew what Group C was. Sometimes there would be some snickering or some comments when we were called. I practiced reading to try to get out of this group but never could pull it off. My philosophy on this was that it didn't work. I really didn't know what the teachers were looking to accomplish by these groups. They put kids who had trouble reading in groups that didn't make them push themselves. The groups didn't make them want to try. Everyone in the group was just as good as everyone else in the group. There

was no motivation to make you try harder. Also, you were branded with your group you were stuck in. When I was in Group C I was stuck there for four years. (Matt)

#3

- Earlier in my life, I recall going to kindergarten in the States. I have a lucid memory of arriving at a beige, one-story building, where kids spoke English, a language I did not understand. [I heard] garbled sounds with an occasionally familiar word. [I had] a sense of seclusion from the world. I was plunged in an environment which forced me to learn, for none of us likes to remain in the dark. Years later, English is ingrained in my mind. I think in English as I think in Hebrew, and that day is my earliest recollection of learning English. Like a brand it was stamped in my mind and became a part of me. (Dave)

#4

- Dear Diary,

I can't believe what just happened to me. We got our report cards today and I got a "U" in independent reading. I have never gotten a "U" before. I hate reading.

...

Somewhere around the age of eleven, I began to despise reading. It was no longer an enjoyable activity for me because I had to do it. It was required. Before, reading had been mostly of my own free will, but now my teachers sent home a log book to keep track of reading progress, that had to be signed by parents...Unfortunately, my despising reading was not just a phase, it still sticks with me today. My love for reading has had a few attempted comebacks, but my loathing for it continues to win out. (Jill)

Ways of Reading

There is a definite range in the degree of insult accrued from being misread, by a teacher or singled out or "branded." These insults get absorbed right into the body at the tissue level. In the same way Patricia Foster notes the hot flush of shame, Jocelyn writes, "my cheeks were hot from being singled out."

One student feels nonplussed from receiving a “U” in reading. In Ben Anastas debut novel, *an underachiever’s diary* (1998), he creates a fictional diary of a student who is labeled “u” for “underachiever.” The story is told from the point of view of the firstborn child about two brothers who are identical twins. Anastas creates a playful spoof of the cultural trope of the “rise to success” story. William, the narrator, delightfully overturns the sacred American convention of laying out all of one’s material, spiritual and intellectual achievements for edification. Instead, he makes a point of marking all of his failures, beginning with sucking – “sucking, a vital instinct in a newborn, was a problem for me” (5), and from there he details how he’s slow to walk, slow to talk, and quick to get sick.

At William’s first parent-teacher conferences, his twin is praised for thriving in the new environment and getting along well with peers and then Anastas introduces William’s development as seen through the teacher’s eyes. He writes,

When discussion turned to me, the *Verwalter* put on a pair of half-glasses and consulted her notes. ‘William’s time here, as of yet, has been undistinguished. He ignores the other children, and they in turn pay no mind to him. He never completed his puppet theater, tore up his self-portrait before it was finished, and his mobile – how shall I put it? – was a less than average construction. There are times, of course, when he shows great potential. Just last week he told one of my colleagues about a dream in vivid detail, something about snakes and witches, which sounded fascinating’...

And so the first grave sentence had been passed against me, branding my forehead, and my educational record, with a U, for underachiever. I didn’t know it then, but this label would haunt me throughout my childhood, and adolescence, and well into my adult life, which I will get to eventually. Like a middle-class Hester Prynne progressive society had deemed me guilty of something unforgivable,

and saw to it that I would suffer for squandering my talent, privilege, and early access to such enlightened ideals—all the gifts that set them apart from the mainstream of society, or so my parents believed. I may be overstating my case, but the point remains: that hovering, invisible U became my ally, my conscience, a dear and loyal friend when I most needed one. Who else would see me through the endless turmoil of growing up? What could ease my anxiety? (Anastas 30-31)

The point I draw from Anastas is that the labels students inherit over the long course of schooling leave indelible marks. The label becomes the alter ego if not one's primary sense of self.

"Invisible": Case Study of A Stigma Narrative

I remember when I became invisible. It wasn't like it happened over night. It was really quite a gradual occurrence.

—Gail, student literacy narrative

...you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds... It's when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back... You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world.

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*.

"Invisible," is a stigma narrative given to me by a colleague and friend, one that contains a number of "fault lines" that can instruct writing teachers on conditions that can lead writing instruction to go awry. Gail disrupts a reader's expectations of the genre of literacy narratives. Unlike other students who spend a great deal of their narratives talking about the difficulties they have faced in acquiring literacy, Gail simply takes for granted that she's hyper-literate and that literacy is not a struggle for her. It is implied in her text by her advanced

placement in her English class, that nobody has criticized her writing or her skills as a reader, but instead she's criticized for who she is. By choosing not to deliver a more "traditional" history of literate development—one that traces memories of reading and depicts scenes of writing instruction, she is able to focus on a "theme" in her educational life—that of feeling invisible, and fighting to be seen. In this way she reveals a gift for locating the "conventional and transgress[ing] it through satire or criticism" (Newkirk 63).

The Performance of "Underlife" and the Necessity of Unpacking "Invisibility"

It was then and still is my belief that any group of persons—prisoners, primitives, pilots, or patients—develop a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable, and normal, once you get close to it.

—Erving Goffman, *Asylums*

In Gail's lead line, she explains rather matter-of-factly that she remembers when she "became invisible." She writes of "invisibility" as a taken-for-granted theme that colors the whole of her educational experiences, beginning as early as junior high school. She begins on a reflective note and explains that, "It wasn't like it happened over night. It was really quite a gradual occurrence." She acts as a critical theorist and a phenomenologist, relying both on the text of her life, in addition the texts she's read, to develop a workable "reading" of what happened to her in school to leave her feeling so alienated and ostracized from the school community.

Her opening line echo the earliest lines in Ralph Ellison's novel, the *Invisible Man*. Considering that she is a white, female middle-class student writing today and Ellison is a male, African American author writing in the fifties, their separate descriptions of the condition of "invisibility" are almost uncanny in their similarities. Ellison's narrator begins,

I am an invisible man.

No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. *I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.* Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. *When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me.* (Ellison 3 italics added)

There are properties of invisibility that are worth studying because it is dangerous for any student to inhabit a classroom feeling so unreal, immaterial and powerless. What we can learn as writing teachers from Gail's narrative is to question both what we see and what we choose not to see in the writing classroom. In the process of crafting her literacy narrative, she seems able to "step back and stitch together the myriad elements of . . . [her life] into [a] significant [whole]" (Brockelman 118). Her literacy narrative seems to circle around many of the big questions, "*what's going on? Where did we come from? What are we doing here? Where are we headed? How ought we to live?*" (Brockelman 118). And more specifically, "How does a student learn to become invisible to herself?"

“Playing Dress Up”

...our social identities are rarely the stable amalgams we take them to be. . .our identities are forever in ferment, giving rise to numerous strains, paradoxes, ambivalences, and contradictions within ourselves.

— Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture and Identity*

Robert Carr, or Trebor, had been my best friend. It was appropriate that his nickname was Trebor. Everything about him just seemed backward. We spent so many afternoons playing dress up. . . Sometimes he would don one of my fifty cent prom dresses and I would wear a tux, complete with tails. We were so glam.

— Gail

Gail does in prose what she does in life — she tends to shock her audiences. She transgresses both at the level of personal dress and demeanor and in terms of sanctioned school etiquette, always working at the fringes of conventional behavior.²⁷ As the brief epigraph to this section attests, she tends to highlight the imperfect nature of her relationships in social contexts. She is not inclined to conform to “conventional” ways of being and to accommodate “tradition” in the same way other students do. She helps me to see that, “in telling . . . stories, narrators take up models of identity that are culturally available” and that,

the practices through which people assemble narratives out of their own experiential histories, cannot escape being dialogical, although its central myths resist this recognition. Autobiography is

²⁷ See also James Paul Gee. “What Is Literacy?” in *Teaching & Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry* 2 (1) Fall 1987:3-11. Gee says, “Think of discourse as an ‘identity kit’ which comes with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act and talk so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize” (3). It seems that Gail always pulls out the wrong “kit” at the wrong time, and this plays a key role in her perceived invisibility.

contextually marked, collaboratively mediated, provisional (Smith and Watson 9).

Like all of us, Gail encounters various “imposed systems” as de Certeau calls those bureaucracies, or organizations, or institutions “designed to manage people” (Smith and Watson 10). She challenges gender norms for her sex by reversing the roles in an imaginary “prom” she has with her friend Trebor so that he dons the prom dress and she sports the “tux with tails.”

Later, Gail explains that she “overlooked how feminine” Trebor was, that she “didn’t want to see it.” She says, “I was so deep in angsty teenage love that I refused to admit that Trebor was gay.” In the same way her teacher and peers chose not to see her, or to see her as she likes to be seen, she’s confronted with a situation where she can’t (or chooses not to) see clearly herself. This is a narrative that seems to present layers and layers of incomplete or “failed readings” of the texts of social scenes. What at first glance seems to be a playful situation of “dressing up” apparently having nothing to do with “literacy,” is a politically charged scene intimately connected to the power relations involved in the acquisition of literacy. Bakhtin’s discussion of “carnavalesque” (as well as his theories of parody, authoritative discourse, and subaltern styles)²⁸ help me to read her scene of “dressing up” and how they represent what Bakhtin would call the “world inside out.”

²⁸ See Susan Miller, *Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991.

She portrays a self that feels virtually powerless in the school setting, yet a great deal of her strength comes from memories of “dressing up.” By performing various presentations of self in both the company of Trebor and the relative privacy of her home she acquires a feeling of agency that she seems to be denied in school but which nevertheless may contribute to her strong prose voice on the page. Her off-stage carnival moments help her to see the world more clearly, they help her to become more critical of “cold rationalism, against official, formalistic, and logical authoritarianism; . . . a rejection of that which is finished and completed” (Introduction, *Bakhtin* 37). She offers a shrewd criticism of the dominant ideologies she sees surrounding her, when she offers this description of her peers. She says:

coming into class, Pinkerton’s prodigies wouldn’t even break from their discussion about the National Honor Society, who had a better GPA, or who was applying for early acceptance to whatever schools these pseudo-intellectual brats went to learn to make their millions or how to build a better bomb.

She moves from a critique of material culture, to a critique of religious discourse (when she briefly mentions her friend Trebor’s mother is a “Jehovah Witness” who Trebor “loved to piss off” and who she “loved to help”). Finally she ends up in “a special hospital where the invisible go to rest.” In this way, she moves from the institution of school, to family, to religion, to the field of medicine and mental health. Interestingly, each space allows a certain story to be told, providing “localized sites through which certain kinds of subjects are recognized

and mis-recognized." In representing literate behavior she is modeling how adaptive one must be to communicate across a spectrum of different "localized sites." In *Getting a Life*, both Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write, "on a daily basis individuals move into, through, and out of these disparate social spaces, and participate in specific, yet different, narrative practices through which we become subjects in and out of stories" (Smith and Watson 10).

What is most striking about Gail's story is that she seems to be an outsider everywhere and although this may seem to be a curse on the one hand, she appears to be a savvy narrator with a simultaneously privileged and disadvantaged vantage point "outside" which allows her to see more clearly in some ways. Gail seems to move about "on the hem of life" except, instead of trying "to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment" she seems to tell her story to "invoke, or dissociate [herself] from, the values of the institution prescribing [her] narrative" (Morrison, 18; Smith and Watson 13).

The First Day of School

Her literacy narrative is intriguing because in place of receiving lists of memorable texts and warm scenes of being read to, we're given a detailed description of her attire. She describes her shoes as "the crowning piece" of her "ensemble." This is how she remembers the first day of school.

From the very first day I knew she couldn't see me. I had come to class wearing my hair piled on top of my head in two piles, shaped into something resembling teddy bear ears. Around my neck was a red patent leather cat collar studded with rhinestones. It was too tight so if I was going upstairs or doing anything requiring exertion I

had to remove it or else turn purple and start to suffocate. I wore my favorite black polyester blouse and a floor length pencil-straight black skirt. With my pink Doctor Martins as the crowning piece of my ensemble I didn't see how she could miss me. Still, she did.

She's a writer who composes a self with her words and her clothing and I suspect this daily fashion show is more intimately tied to scenes of literacy than we would guess at a first glance. Alison Lurie questions, "is clothing not virtually a visual language, with its own distinctive grammar, syntax and vocabulary?" (Davis 3). While most narratives pattern themselves on larger cultural stories: the "rise to success narrative," the story of literacy acquisition cast as a romantic love story, schooling as "an odyssey," Gail presents herself as stigmatized by her invisibility – or her invisibility stems from her inability to fit into these conventional narratives. She takes to task the "so-called master statuses (i.e. age, gender, physical beauty, class and race) for which Western culture itself has scripted directives and valuations often at variance with each other" (Davis 26). Her first stigma as a learner is that she refuses to acknowledge or adhere to culturally scripted directives which in turn threaten her teacher, since "antifashion is usually viewed by those in authority. . . as a form of political protest. It is thereby automatically rendered suspect" (Davis 166). As a fashion bricoleur she "determinedly oppositional to middle-class dress" and this is a critical fact in this literacy are often narratives of middle-class socialization.²⁹ She

²⁹ Bloom, Lynn Z. "Freshman Composition As A Middle-Class Enterprise," in *College English*. Vol. 58, No. 6, October 1996. Bloom writes, "like swimmers passing through the chlorine footbath en route to plunging into the pool, students must first be disinfected in Freshman English" (656).

seems to confront and challenge “the symbolic hegemony of the reigning fashion. [Antifashion] injects itself headlong into the dialogue of fashion by attempting through its iconoclasms to debunk and deride the dominant mode” (David 183-4).

She is the bricoleur “who takes up bits and pieces of the identities and narrative forms available and, by disjoining them in excessive ways, creates a history of the subject at a precise point in time and space” (Smith and Watson 14). What strikes me about this particular literacy narrative is the fact that this single writer contains so many of our culture’s unspeakable stories – alcoholism and addiction, mental illness, homosexuality, and a deep ambivalence about her gender. She helps me to see how I participate in “the mapping of knowledge and ignorance,” as a teacher and she helps me to see that, like Ms DeCostal, her teacher, there are many areas of experience I’ve been trained not to see, to look away from – one of which is how to proceed with a student whose behavior falls so totally outside of any sort of easy explanation or conventional frame of reference.

Ms. DeCostal as “Anti-Hero”

Gail defines herself against her English teacher Ms. DeCostal, and against her sophomore year English classroom and finally against the institution of

She lists middle-class virtues/values: self-reliance, respectability, decorum, moderation, thrift, efficiency, order, cleanliness, punctuality, delayed gratification, critical thinking.

Pinkerton Academy. Her teacher fits the profile of the “anti-hero”³⁰ and she writes:

The proof of my full transition into an apparition came in my sophomore years of high school. I found myself in Ms. DeCostal’s A-level English class. Her classroom was pretty typical. Upon my entrance I smelled musty books and the ghosts of thirty adolescents packed into close quarters. Ms. DeCostal’s classroom quite accurately depicted how she herself was. . . cold. There were no Garfield posters or depiction’s of Charlie Brown and the gang holding hands surrounding a cartoon earth captioned, ‘Everyone Smiles in the Same Language.’ No, her walls were bare.

Here the narrative more explicitly becomes a “cautionary tale.” I think it is valuable that she studies classroom space and is acutely attuned to how the physical environment affects the learning. This is an unholy space—bodies packed into close quarters. Sterile walls. She depicts her teacher as simply a product of this environment and the subtle message is this: *this is not an education that is either useful or hopeful, either to the body or the mind and she begins to carefully explain why*. She seems to engage with our culture’s depiction’s of teachers in general when she writes,

She herself was a somewhat plain woman, but I suppose that one could argue that all high school English teachers look the same. Most of them have a look as though their brains had given into the mind-numbing process of public education. The eyes are flat, devoid of passion that they once felt for Eliot and Vonnegut. Listless is the best word for a burnt out English teacher. They have given up, given in. The oldish hens start packing on the pounds from shoving candy bars into their faces while devouring the newest Danielle Steele novel in the teacher’s lounge or they become cold and hard, unable to stomach even their own monotonous speeches never mind

³⁰ See Newkirk, Tom. *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*. New Hampshire: Boynton/Cook Publishers HEINEMANN, 1997.

food. The men become balder and more smarmy looking. They leer and drool over the fresh meat that is a sixteen year old girl. This is not true of all English teachers. Some of the most beautiful faces I have ever known, the faces who have helped me through my invisibility, have been English teachers. Ms. DeCosta is not one of these beautiful faces.

Gail's rendition of the school setting resonates eerily with Mary Karr's school memories in *The Liars' Club*. Karr writes, in *Antelope* it "was as if everybody had been given some powerful narcotic. The kids were pasty-faced and indistinct" (218) and she describes this place where learning is supposed to happen as "the vacuum of that classroom" (218). The kids are left alone in the classroom to get through "self-paced learning" which involved getting through "a stupid system where you moved from one level to the next wholly unsupervised" (218). The teachers in this particular school all congregate in the teacher's lounge which Karr describes in this way,

Inside, the place was solid smoke. All the teachers at that time were women, and stout women at that. Their broad backs faced me, their zippers straining to hold them inside their pastel dresses. Their enormous bottoms spilled over their wooden chairs on both sides. When their faces turned my way, I could see that each lady teacher had an aluminum ashtray all her own. Each had an empty paper plate with a white plastic fork that had been licked clean. And in the table's center sat the remains of a chocolate sheet cake. The piece of baker's cardboard it had been squatting on resembled a big muddy football field torn up by cleat marks or claw marks. (219)

There seem to be two kinds of anti-heroes in the classroom. On the one hand, you have the English teacher that Gail describes as cold, dispassionate and unaffected and, on the other hand, the teacher who is overworked by focusing

too heartily on corrections. Either way, we have teachers modeling a small life, tight, constricted, bored existence. What happens to a student's sense of self when a teacher only seems to communicate as Gail writes in "sharp, peeved tone[s]" in a "clipped way of speaking, sharp, like her icy blue eyes?"

Clean Bodies and Clean Prose

I always thought I looked like someone had stomped in a mud puddle and the dirt had managed to reach my face but I was unable to clean it off.

---Gail

...the original student of composition was...defined by Harvard's entrance exam as the lower and in some ways the 'animal' order, in need of scrubbing.

—Susan Miller, *Textual Carnivals*, 85

There are passages in Gail's literacy narrative where she describes her physical self in "dirty" terms. Ann McClintock argues that "the poetics of cleanliness is a poetics of social discipline" McClintock. Gail writes,

I thought it strange that I should suffer from being invisible, yet I could still see myself in the mirror. I remember looking closely at my reflection in the pink tiled girls' room mirror one day before class. I slowly came from the left, as if to creep up on the mirror. I thought that maybe in that instant I really wouldn't be there. Still, I saw my left side of my strawberry blond hair come into sight, followed by the angle of my left cheek bone. Next I saw my left eye. It resembled the color snot turns just before you get a really bad chest cold. I saw the freckles that peppered my face. I always thought I looked like someone had stomped in a mud puddle and the dirt had managed to reach my face but I was unable to clean it off.

Gail describes her physical features in grotesque terms: with eyes “the color that snot turns just before you get a really bad chest-cold,” and “two huge lips,” with a “worm-like scar under my lower lip.” Her prose style is evocative of the literature of the “grotesque realism” which functions

to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things. (Introduction, *Bakhtin* 34).

It’s a political act that Gail doesn’t spare readers in her depiction of her body, the way Morrison doesn’t spare readers in her depiction’s of the body’s functions. Both writers employ thick description as Morrison does in the opening scene of *The Bluest Eye* when Claudia is sick,

The puke swaddles down the pillow onto the sheet—green-grey, with flecks of orange. It moves like the insides of an uncooked egg. Stubbornly clinging to its own mass, refusing to break up and be removed. How, I wonder, can it be so neat and nasty at the same time? (Morrison 13)

The idea that something can be both “neat and nasty” at the same time resonates with Gail’s perception that she is all “nasty,” and Pinkerton Academy is all neat. Between these two polarities there seems to be no middle ground for her. Bakhtin says that “debasement is the fundamental artistic principle of grotesque realism; all that is sacred and exalted is rethought on the level of the material

body" (*Rabelais and His World* 370). He argues that "the grotesque body. . .is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world" (Bakhtin 317). He goes on to say that "the artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescence's...and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body's limited space" (318). What is invaluable about her text is the way she is able to open things up to expose their rough edges. She challenges the "impenetrable surface" of school.

Faith in Narration: The Past as "Undesirable Other"

Autobiographical subjects can facilitate changes in the mapping of knowledge and ignorance, of what is speakable or unspeakable, disclosed or masked, alienating or communally bonding...In this way they create the past as 'the undesirable other' in order to change the story.

—Smith and Watson, *Getting A Life* 16

Her history eventually leads to a crisis of faith that life has any meaning and yet it seems that through the act of finding words to narrate her experience of "invisibility" she comes to a richer understanding of herself as a writer and as a person in community with others. It seems to me the act of narrating her school experience on the page allows her to see her paper as a "third artifact," something outside of herself, and to see her past as "an undesirable other" and

the story she creates gives her a heightened sense of agency that seems to allow her to see what was once a scene of defeat and alienation as a scene of triumph and new self-awareness (Newkirk).

I think that in constructing the story of what happens to her in school, she would agree with the black narrator in Ellison's *Invisible Man* "that invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality" (Ellison 3). For Gail, the distinction between "*inner* eyes" and "*physical* eyes" is important. Physical eyes refers to sight and "*inner* eyes" refers to insight which stem from inherited beliefs, values and learned ways of reading the world. The outside world does not know how to "read" the narrator in *Invisible Man*, and Gail's teacher "Ms. DeCostal" and peers don't know how to read Gail because she disrupts conventional behavior at every turn. Like the "Invisible Man" she offers a similar reading of her experience of invisibility when she explains in her opening paragraph,

It was almost as though they had seen a thing that they were too frightened to look at, and perhaps if they ignored me long enough I would go away. It was this way with most adults. They would look beyond the space where I stood, at the wall behind me, just to me left, or immediately to my right. I know this sounds a little on the paranoid side, so I came to the conclusion that I must have been beginning to fade from sight. It wasn't that they were ignoring me, rather the teachers questioned if I had merely been an apparition of their over taxed brains. That's all that I could come up with, because why would big, smart, powerful, and educated adults be afraid of a punk ass kid? (501 student)

I read this as a literacy narrative “fashioned as a raft of hope” like so many other memoirs, and what is interesting is that in the end she says,

I tried to go back to Pinkerton armed with the knowledge that maybe it wasn't really that I was invisible, rather it was fear that kept teachers like Ms. DeCostal from seeing me. As soon as I realized that being invisible is merely a product of fear and other people's insecurities I began to reappear to myself. I knew that each of these people who could not see me had created their own reality through the desire not have me in their line of vision.

She ends with a letter:

*Ms. DeCostal,
My name is Gail. Believe it or not I was in your class all year. I find it somewhat ironic that you would pass a student with an A- average despite the fact that you would never acknowledge my presence in class. I know now that it was out of fear and ignorance that you chose to pretend that I was not a functioning member of your classroom. It has been incredibly damaging to be made invisible by a woman who should have been a role model.
Gail
(that girl in the back of the room).*

By inviting literacy histories we also invite the possibility of remembering traumatic incidences of experiencing stigma-in-school. Students “bear witness” as Felman writes and critically look back to re-read the scene of the past to see how some negative assessment (as in Will's “U” for underachiever) or social humiliation (“*Judy is not a good leader*”) or feeling like feeling “invisible” can have a pernicious hold on a student's sense of self, crippling their ability to act to their full abilities in the present.

Chapter 7: Re-Imagining The Writer's Sense of Self

I. The Fictional Quality of Literacy Histories

All those memories that begin with the author's recollections of life at age three, I never trust them. Never. What baloney, I think to myself, who is the author fooling for heaven's sake?

—Ruth Behar, *"La Cortada"*

AT a job interview in Buffalo, New York after a presentation of my research, a professor in the room asked, "How do you know if the students are just making these stories up?" I think about his question, but mostly I think about how there are better questions. There is certainly a great fictional element to these stories—how could there not be since memory is involved. For example, my sister and I recently started to write a collaborative memoir in which we each write our version of certain places or incidents from our childhoods. The idea began with the fact that, though we share the same roots, our experiences of the past are extraordinarily different. Her version sometimes is unrecognizable to me, and vice versa. We stopped accusing each other of lying and simply started to write our versions as we lived them. It doesn't seem to matter if there isn't 100% factual veracity like a legal document—that's not the point at all. The point is that the student feels she captures the "feel" of the past, in the same way all nonfiction attempts to be accurate. Ruth Behar asks in the beginning of her

essay, "*The Girl In The Cast*" "aren't all of our childhoods imaginary homelands? Aren't they fictions about the places left behind?" (135).

The question of fiction/nonfiction is a framework question we can incorporate as a central question in all our writing classes. It is important that students ask questions and explore the edges, borders and slippage of genres. It gets them involved in a cutting-edge question in the field of composition, evidenced by a proliferation of connected conference panels in the field — most recently by a conference held by the Partisan Review on "*Autobiography, Biography, & Memoir*." At this conference panelists addressed such topics as "The Past As Fiction" or "Facts and Fictions in All Three Genres" or "Ways of Writing About the Self."³¹

Another way to approach the fiction/nonfiction question is to do as Jill Ker Conway writes, in *When Memory Speaks: Reflections of Autobiography*,

we should pay close attention to our stories. Polish their imagery. . . Search for ways we experience life differently from the inherited version and edit the plot accordingly, keeping our eyes on the philosophical implications of the changes we make. Was this action free? Was that one determined? How does the intersection of the two change the trajectory of a life? (Conway 177)

II. Revisionist Historiography

It is deeply satisfying to believe that we are not locked into our original statements, that we might start and stop, erase, use the delete key in life, [that] words can be retracted; souls can be reincarnated. Such beliefs have informed my study of revision.

³¹ See *Partisan Review: Autobiography, Biography, and Memoir*. Vol. LXVIII, No. 1 Boston: Boston University, Winter 2001.

–Nancy Sommers, *"I Stand Here Writing"*

Pat Sullivan gave me a copy of *"A Happy Childhood"* – a poem that invokes all the shifting selves who exist within the self across time. It's a poem that acknowledges the power of studying history in order to live in a more conscious present. This is William Matthews, offering a poetic version of "revisionist historiography,"

A Happy Childhood

...
It turns out you are the story of your childhood
and you're under constant revision,
like a lonely folktale whose invisible folks

are all selves you've been, lifelong
shadows in fog, grey glimmers at dusk.
And each of these selves had a childhood...

...
There's no truth about your childhood,
though there's a story, your to tend,

like a fire or a garden. Make it a good one,
since you'll have to live it out, and all
its revisions, so long as you shall live. (35-36)

As the poet suggests, literacy histories house the potential for "revisionist historiography" – that is, when a writer writes her sense of the truth of the past she can also begin the process of imaginatively and creatively re-reading "truths" through multiple lenses and perspectives, so as not to be caught in a static sense of history.

Perhaps, in the same way Toni Morrison creates the character “Beloved” to be “the embodiment of the past that must be remembered in order to be forgotten,” students’ literacy histories could “symbolize what must be reincarnated in order to be buried properly” (Rushdie 571). They learn to address events of the past in order to be on a better footing as they move into the future. Like the character “Denver” in *Beloved*, they learn to face aspects of their schooling they may have repressed, what Morrison calls “the hurt of the hurt world,” – important work since “we carry our wounds and perhaps even worse, our capacity to wound, forward with us” (Morrison 28; Hampl 136).

Tom Newkirk points to this same possibility in *The Performance of Self in Student Writing* when he argues,

It is far more profitable to view students as occupying subject positions, trying on ‘subjectivities’ that are made available in a literate culture. Sentimental literature, pastoral literature, confessional literature – all part of the available repertoire. Furthermore, each tradition predisposes the writer to see some things and miss others. Finally, to be aware of these traditions as traditions, and not ‘natural’ ways of self-representation can increase the options by allowing us to see the boundaries as ‘moveable.’ (96)

A Brief Case Study of “Revisionist Historiography”

The story of a life is less than the actual life, because the story is told selectively, partial, contextually constructed and because the life is not yet over. But the story of a life is also more than the life, the contours, and meanings allegorically extending to others, others seeing themselves, knowing themselves, through another’s life story, re-visioning their own.

—Laurel Richardson, *Fields of Play:
Constructing An Academic Life*

In Lucy's literacy history, the third grade year is described as "a long year of penmanship, vocabulary notebooks, penmanship, spelling, and more penmanship." The repetition of penmanship suggests it is the vivid source of pain. She questions the emphasis on appearances. After describing being "ridiculed for [her] messiness" and her "crippled style of penmanship," she writes, "Through these times of devastation and hopelessness there was one true moment of triumph." She is given "a short writing assignment," and she chooses to write about her great grandmother. She writes,

I wrote about the excitement I felt when my great grammy would take me to the toy store and buy me superman comics, and how she'd place me up on her knee and read them out loud. I wrote about how she never yelled or frowned, only smiled and loved. I wrote about the root beer and the ice-cream Hoodsies that were always waiting for my cousins and me at her kitchen table. I wrote about the smell of her house. . .the sweet smell of flowers with the distinct aroma of purple lilacs. The smell created the illusion of stepping into a beautiful garden. I wrote about how much I loved her and missed her, and how I wondered where she was now.

Her teacher creates a space for narrative writing in lieu of exercises, drills and practicing penmanship. Lucy revises her understanding of the subject of English, and writes,

All this was purely written straight from the heart of a little eight-year old girl. I remember the writing conference I had with the teacher. I gave her the story, waiting for her to take her red pen and start slashing, crossing and rephrasing. But she didn't touch her pen, not once. Instead she held the paper, her hands slightly trembling. I looked up and saw a single tear, running down her face, then another. . .The only comment made toward that paper was,

"This is very good Lucy." This is when I began to realize the impact writing could create. This is when I began to see the magic of writing. These little moments are the moments which prevented my hatred of English from sinking into my subconscious mind, never allowing my love of English to seep through. These are moments that kept English alive in my head.

Reading Lucy's narrative makes me realize that often the "real cash value" in learning are those precious times when you feel you've just been "seen" or "heard" at a deep level that acknowledges who you are. As June Jordan writes in a poem,

Most people search all / of their lives / for someplace to belong to /
as you said / but I look instead / into the eyes / of anyone / who
talks to me / I search for a face / to believe and belong to / a
loosening mask / with a voice / ears / and a consciousness /
breathing through / a nose / I can see / Day to day / it's the only
way / I like to travel (Jordan 1).

Barbara Kingsolver in explaining the molting process of her hermit crab offers a useful metaphor to visualize the process of "revisionist historiography." In her essay, "Reprise" in *High Tide in Tucson*, Kingsolver writes "Crabs have the option: they can split themselves from time to time and start life with fresh skin, complete with new appendages and even — if need be — with regenerated eyes" (Kingsolver 263). Lucy shows how she undergoes a similar "molting" process of shedding an old skin for a new one, of actively revising her sense of the past and its negative hold on her. Her literacy narrative, entitled "*Progressing*" embodies the "dual perspective" of "remembering and forgetting, accusing and embracing, burying and reviving, joy and oppression" (Rushdie 575). Lucy writes in her

opening paragraph "The story of my literate history is a story of. . . a progression from confusion to understanding, from fear to love, from boredom to amazement, from enslavement to freedom" (Lucy, 1998). One of the reasons that the narrative swings from enslavement to freedom is because Lucy is able to revise her sense of self as a writer and person. Reading her writing confirms my sense that, "classroom practices which promote an understanding of self as writer are likely to teach writing more effectively than practices which focus only on. . .internalizing rules" (Brooke 5). Since her early experiences of writing and reading entail internalizing rules, she writes,

I wasn't able to get my teacher to read my papers unless they lived up to her expectations of neatness. Then we had this dreaded composition folder method of writing. With this method, when we'd write a story, three key focus rules would be chosen. These rules included such things as dotting the "I's, no run-on sentences, and correct spelling. Our story could have contained complete meaningless nonsense but if we followed these simple three rules accurately then our story would be glorified. (Lucy, 1998).

Sixth grade is a "revolutionary year" because she has a teacher who "encouraged me to think on my own" and not surprisingly, "this [is the] year I began to believe in myself." Although clear rules about writing provide a sense of structure and safety for students, these lessons need to be accompanied by the freedom to experiment with words, to take chances, to say who they are and how they got there.

A strong sense of self emerges when students are invited to invent, imagine, and experiment. A classroom that respects the idea that learning is

“messy” fosters an atmosphere conducive to active thinking/exploration, while emphasizing rules that suggest a “right” way to write threatens the ability to hear a diversity of voices. Reading Lucy’s literacy narrative confirms my sense that “there is no single standard, no one way to think or write. . .” and that I need to hone my skills as a teacher to be able to “glory in contradiction and confusion” (Murray 140).

Lucy casts her self in the role of a “slave” for most of her early educational experiences. She is slave to her red pens, corrections, and remarks “I was slave to punctuation, grammar, spelling, vocabulary.” The emphasis changes slightly as the contexts shift and she moves through different grade levels, but the emphasis seems to remain on creating a right-wrong, rule bound world. She notices that in high school “penmanship was replaced by Latin root vocabulary exercises” and “instead of composition folders we had grammar drills. The enslavement to punctuation, grammar, and spelling, still strongly existed” (Lucy, 1998). Finally, she says that, “Freshman year put me over the line. I was afraid to write anything. I went into a writing coma. Every sentence that was created from my pen and paper was created in order to please the teacher, to please the grammar and punctuation, never to please myself!” (Lucy, 1998). In *Writing and Sense of Self*, Robert Brooke writes, “Learning to write meaningfully in our culture requires developing an understanding of the self as writer, as someone who uses writing to further personal thinking and to help solve public problems” (Brooke 5). In writing her literacy narrative Lucy comes to the insight

that there are moments in school when she is invited to take a more active role in her own education, when she is allowed a subject position, other than subservient rule follower. Reflecting on her junior year of high school Lucy writes,

I began to speak up, and people began to listen. I began to write and my teacher began to comment with encouragement and constructive criticism. That year we read *Catcher In the Rye* [which] served as my bible. J.D. Salinger was my god. Holden Caulfield was my savior. . . .I believe Anne Lamott said it best, 'I read *Catcher In the Rye* for the first time and knew what it was like to have someone speak for me, to close a book with a sense of both triumph and relief, one lonely isolated social animal finally made contact" (Lamott 8). This was my first true experience of really understanding and connecting with a book! (Lucy)

She revises her conception of language as a static technology, a matter of learning "right" answers in "correct" formats and she sees for the first time that language is also a way of making sense of the world. Although language use had been taught and experienced in such a way it seemed divorced from reality, Lucy sees that writing/reading , "language and reality are dynamically interconnected" (Kutz 189, Freire 29). She goes on to say that,

Junior year was the first year I had written a true thesis paper as well. I remember thinking that these papers were not English papers. They weren't about following rules having to do with punctuation and grammatical structure. They were about creating, building connections, analyzing and most importantly thinking. I loved these papers! (Lucy, 1988).

Barbara Kingsolver continues to explain in her essay "Reprise" that "when (a) crab molts, it emerges larger; since its skin has no elasticity, this is the only way it can grow" (264). Lucy talks about another influential book, entitled

Ismael, by Daniel Quinn which “changed [her] forever.” She writes “The book didn’t give me any answers, but it did do something amazing. It pulled me out of my little shell, temporarily took me outside of the world I live in, and forced me to look at things in a completely new perspective. It left me lost.” Unlike the hermit crab which “panics” if “it can’t fit back into the shell it parked nearby to molting,” Lucy seems okay with not-knowing (Kingsolver 264). Perhaps she senses the freedom that comes from seeing the boundaries as moveable. She demonstrates she’s able to move fluidly between subject positions in her literacy narratives and in later writings in the course as well.

I think in the process of writing her literacy narrative Lucy is able to articulate a new awareness of the symbiotic relationship between writing and reading and she realizes “. . . revision is not. . . the act of tidying up past transgressions, but [is] the ongoing process of entertaining alternatives” (Miller 285). It was not always this way. She notes after reading *Bird by Bird* that “while I was moving away from English and writing, Anne Lamott was using writing as a way of expressing herself” (Lucy, 1998). She discovers she can relate to Anne Lamott’s struggle “to find some sort of creative or spiritual or aesthetic way of seeing the world and organizing it in my head” (Lamott 9). Reading this pivotal scene I’m reminded of what Jane Tompkins writes in *A Life In School*, that “. . . people often assume that attention to the emotional lives of students, to their spiritual yearnings and their imaginative energies, will somehow inhibit the intellects free play, drown it in a wash of sentiment, or deflect it into the realms

of fantasy and escape, that the critical analytical faculties will be muffled, reined in, or blunted as a result" (?). Tompkins says on the contrary, "I believe the reverse to be true" and after reading Lucy's literacy narrative and after witnessing the passion and conviction of later writings, I do too. Reading the literacy narratives in general teaches me to widen my lens so that my attention isn't focused solely on "written products[s], a set of composing processes, or an understanding of the rhetorical task" to see writing as "part of a much larger and more basic activity: the development and negation of individual identity in a complex social environment" (Brooke 5). These histories seek a more holistic approach to education that recognizes that students need to learn to "be with other people. . .[to] address the need for purpose and for connectedness to ourselves and one another; it would not leave [them] alone to wander the world armed with plenty of knowledge but lacking the skills to handle the things that are coming up in [their] lives" (Tompkins xvi).

These freshman writers learn to revise (not just on the page but in the body, in the way they look at the past); they learn to question the version they have told of the past; they learn to remember — learning that memory is an intensely political activity — in the sense that what you remember is who you become in the end. Finally, in the words of Maya Angelou they learn that "we are created creative and can invent scenarios as frequently as they are needed" (Angelou 66). When the boundaries of genres and selves are seen as permeable, learning becomes intensely creative again. These "cautionary tales" full of both

stories of inspiring teachers and mentors who have failed them—instruct me on how to teach. They offer guidelines; they tell me they need to be met “halfway” as my student Colin says. They want the learning to be authentic, to have a bearing on their lives beyond the classroom. They want to be inspired and listened to. They want to be seen. They want the sense of power that words can confer. Mary Oliver says in *Blue Pastures* that “you must never give anyone else the responsibility for your life” (68) and, I’d argue, in the end that the revisionist historiography that goes on in constructing these literacy narratives allows students to claim themselves “as their own best thing.”

III. Goals of Literacy Instruction

I no sooner put down one terrific book than I discover another; most recently, *Literacy As A Moral Imperative: Facing The Challenges of a Pluralistic Society*, (1999) by Rebecca Powell. This study dovetails with *Embodied Narratives* because Powell also examines some of the results of “schooled literacy.” Anybody involved in the process of conceptualizing literacy must read her study and particularly “*Realizing A Democratic Vision*” in which she both lays out and elaborates on the following five criteria for examining our pedagogical decisions,

1. Literacy instruction ought to promote freedom of thought through encouraging diverse perspectives and welcoming productive critique.
2. Literacy instruction ought to enhance students’ communicative competence by considering the social, cultural, and hegemonic dimensions of language use.
3. Literacy instruction ought to be consciously political.
4. Literacy ought to be taught in ways that make students aware of the power of language for transformation.

5. Literacy ought to be taught in ways that nurture a culture of compassion and care. (Powell 65).

In this next section I talk briefly about the ways I've been led to re-imagine the work of the first year writing classroom, by considering what I've learned from reading literacy histories.

IV. Inviting Collage Essays, Meditations, Art and Other Exploratory Writings/Activities

What is exciting...is that an individual and real person's divided subjectivity, unfinished thoughts, and contradictions are sought, tolerated, valued, and used to find space for change.

—Nancy Atwell-Vasey *Nourishing Words*, 15

McLaren recommends that school instruction 'becomes more of a celebration than a painful rite of passage and attempts to incorporate some of the cultural forms of the streetcorner state which, after all, belong to the phenomenal world of the students themselves'. This might involve making more time available for arts activities and for incorporating creative drama as a pedagogical technique, rather than merely relegating it to a timetable slot.

—Foreword xxi *Schooling as a Ritual
Performance*

Like my students, I, too, struggle to write on many occasions. I remember telling a professor in graduate school that I was having trouble writing a paper on Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* because I kept trying to write a clean essay right away. I kept reining myself in, insisting that ideas spill out on the page logically and without any struggle. I felt at a loss for the tools to get from A to B with words.

There didn't seem to me to be a suitable structure because the idea of the thesis-driven essay seemed too marching, too stilted and regimented.

One of the ways I've found to counteract this kind of paralysis is to study art processes and writing processes. How do writers and artists create? I attempt to counteract my students' negative experiences of an "absorption-regurgitation epistemology" by teaching the experimental, creative nonfictional form of "collage essays" which I find helps students come to trust the logic of their own minds (Connors 72). In this belletristic form of writing students begin to see the ways writers construct ideas and the ways writers pursue meaning because the segmented or collage essay shows its seams. It's a broken form of writing characterized by white space in-between separate paragraphs. Form always emerges organically out of the subject matter. It's a kind of writing that works like meditation; it teaches you where you need to go. Collage essays are "*contrary to rule*" — they're political, unpredictable, and both easy and hard to read because they insist that the reader work alongside the writer to make meaning. I am drawn to read and write and teach these types of essays because their fluid, open quality makes it easier for beginning students to feel they can experiment with the form of their writing.

They are especially useful forms of writing in which to teach the art of revision. My experience shows me that students tend to think of first drafts as last drafts. In a writing workshop, from time to time I have students bring a pair of scissors and we practice cut-and-paste revision in class. It's easier to cut up a

draft that is in the collage form because it's easy to see the separated chunks of thought. It's also easier to physically cut up an essay when you have peer support. I watch students discover how the meaning changes dramatically when the order is shifted. Endings often become leads and students see how new writing needs that emerge require them to go even deeper in their thinking or go outside themselves to discover what others have said about the subject.

What The Students Say

#1

- I have discovered the collage essay. I think this medium of writing bridges the gap between creative writing and factual essays, providing a form that is subtle, yet still leaves room for analysis. The collage essay is the essence of the essay. It lays the facts down on the table and allows the author or the reader to draw the connections. This discovery and exploration has improved my writing. I can surely state that, because now previous pieces seem like they were a child's scribbles. They weren't, though. I see them as a necessary part of my development as a writer. They were the process of discovery, just like this piece I am writing now. My writing will only improve as long as this process continues. If the process becomes stagnant, it will lose its life, creativity and charm. In a year I might toss this piece into the "*why did I write this?*" pile. The process of writing and tossing is what intrigues me, what makes me smile now. Maybe one piece will end up in a "*Send to the publishers*" pile. (Dave)

#2

- I write because I am compelled to...Wherever I go in the world, someone will need words put down for something, and I'll have the skills to do it...A writer is not all that I am but it is a large part of who I am. That's what...enables me to appreciate life's details...I am putting meaning and thought out into the world...I know that, for me, it's not solely *words*, words, words... (Alyssa)

#3

- I had no idea what to expect from my first college English course. I was nerve-racked when I walked in the room. My palms were sweaty and I was ever so slightly shaking, but once I got over the nervousness, I found that it was an exciting class. I was introduced to the journal, which now, I could not live without...Burghild Nina Holzer says, in *A Walk Between Heaven and Earth*, "At least the journal is a place where we can say the unacceptable, and that helps sometimes. But if we are going to keep ourselves on that big leash and be in a hurry all the time, and want to get over with it, not much will happen in the writing process" (6). I think that Holzer explains my path to literacy. All of my experiences previous to college, I felt that I was being kept on a leash. I could see goals in the distance but I had no way of getting myself free enough to reach for them. The scenery stayed the same and my writing became monotonous. By breaking off that leash, I open up a world of endless possibilities for expanding my literacy in all directions. (Kelly)

V. We Think As Bodies

...all intellectual projects are always inevitably autobiographical

— Richard Miller, *The Nervous System*

...we are pulled toward others and the disciplines we practice by currents which often elude us.

— Paula Salvio, *"What Can a Body Know? Refiguring Pedagogic Intention into Teacher Education"*

I come by all of this honestly. I am the kid with the stigma. And I am the successful student. And I am the transgressive one always looking for ways out or ways around.

Initially, I conceptualized each chapter as its own entity. Each of the patterns of literacy narratives emerged as a separate body and the bodies didn't have much to communicate to each other. They were separate planets. I didn't necessarily see the parts as connected until I started to tell someone why I *may*

have been led into this project. And then in a connect-the-dots fashion, when I acknowledged that my own life is embedded in each chapter, the lines that connected each chapter just emerged. I am the connective tissue. I could have studied any other number of angles or avenues. There are certainly more patterns to literacy narratives than “the rise to success,” “the transgressive self” and the “stigmatized self.” But I was drawn almost instinctively to *these* patterns and for *these* reasons:

I can only tell what I know in really broken terms because my memory isn't a very good one. In place of clear pictures of actual moments that I can see I have more visceral memories, more memories housed in sensations and emotions. My emotions are the conduit to the past. For me they act as another way of knowing as critical to me as any book-knowledge. And I have a feeling memory of hearing my mother, who stands at the kitchen sink washing dishes in a rage, say to me, “*What did I ever do to deserve you?*” And then, “*How did you get to be so dumb?*” It's only in hindsight that I know she's telling the story that was told to her by her mother about how she's really the undeserved one and the dumb one. This is, at the very least, second-generation lore.

When you're a kid you're the only one you know who really exists and suddenly all you know is that you're not good enough. The only way you know how to take this knowledge into your body is to do it on the sly. It's slotted as “private” knowledge, a secret no one else should ever know. It's a diffusive kind of knowledge that permeates every cell of your being and colors your vision of

the world from here on out to what feels like eternity. Other people are smart but you're not one of them. And you decide your mother has some sixth sense because she can see it in you or maybe smell it like a bad odor. You move through your house being told that you can't do anything right, but the knowledge comes to you in a series of rhetorical questions: *Can't you put the dish towel back in its place? Can't you empty out the lint tray in the dryer? Can't you pick up that thing on the floor when you walk by it?* In this way you learn to see mistakes before they've even happened, just as you learn to see yourself as a mistake before you've happened. You learn to intuit unspoken rules about right and wrong ways to carry yourself, ways to dress yourself, ways to speak. At the dinner table when you are in the middle of telling a story about something that happened to you in school that day, your father (hearing the speech you've picked up at school) leans over and swoops down on your left cheek and he flicks it hard with his square middle finger sprung from his thumb. Your cheek stings. This is one of the ways you learn Standardized English, otherwise known as "the language of power." The world outside of your house seems both more relaxed and more rigid. You're always on guard with your secret. In 1978, at eight years old you write this note,

Stephanie
I wont to run
a way
I am dum
from Stephanie

Feeling stigmatized, you learn to be nervous for your own good from a very early age. Watch. Listen. Study others faces. Wait. These are poses you slip into instinctually — they serve you well at school, at home, and out in the world. Along with knowing you're dumb, you also know you are fiercely loved by both of your parents.

You are also the rise to success story brought up to shine like a slick trophy. You feel like a winning horse, the one lots of people have bet their money on. Your father. Your mother — both of whom have made more sacrifices for you than is possible to fathom. And your grad school — with all of the resources of time and money they've supplied for you to get to this apex of accomplishment as the world measures these things.

You learn to be successful because success means approval and approval always feels better than the voice that's now inside you who tells you are nothing and will amount to nothing. You learn to get good grades through hard work and perseverance. You learned how to put in the time. To push yourself. To sit in a chair for hours with a book and a highlighter, hell-bent on knowing. You learn to forget your body for the life of the mind. You've learned how to be fluent in the world of words and emotions. You learn to feel successful across cultures: in an academic climate, in the outdoor world, in a world that contains an extraordinarily diverse range of friends and family.

And because the rise to success story can't contain whole aspects of your personality — you're also the transgressive self: rebellious, quick to learn the rules

so that you can break them, quick to feel the edge so that you can cross over it. You are the site of great slippages. You're the clever, ingenious artist self – the creator who has learned to make something out of nothing over and over again and with many mediums, one of which is nothing short of your own body.

And like other students in this study you know you owe a great debt to teachers in and out of school who have helped you to see the world and yourself in it – who have led you to feel your own embodied wholeness.

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Appendices

Invisible

I remember when I became invisible. It wasn't like it happened over night. It really was quite a gradual occurrence. It started junior high school when teachers began to avert their gazes from me. It was almost as though they had seen a thing that they were too frightened to look at, and perhaps if they ignored me long enough I would go away. It was this way with most adults. They would look beyond the space where I stood, at the wall behind me, just to my left, or immediately to my right. I know this seems a little on the paranoid side, so I came to the conclusion that I must have been beginning to fade from sight. It wasn't that they were ignoring me, rather the teachers questioned if I had merely been an apparition of their overtaxed brains. That's all I could come up, because why would big, smart, powerful, and educated adults be afraid of a punk ass kid?

Time went on, as time has a tendency to do, like it or not. As I entered high school at the prestigious Pinkerton Academy, I became more and more transparent. It seemed that no matter how well I did in school my teachers never acknowledged that I was even present in their classes. My nonappearance also seemed to be spreading to my peers. This must have been the case or I would have at least one friend. I remember I used to be visible to some of these kids, but now I found myself circling the perimeter of their groups, trying desperately to find a place to permeate. No one acknowledged me, rather they treated me like a fly on a horse's ass. The horse can't necessarily see the fly, yet he finds it annoying enough to flick his tail at it in an attempt to shoo the pest. Only I wasn't a fly. The best I could figure was that I must be invisible.

Robert, or Trebor, had been my last friend. It was appropriate that his nickname was Trebor. Everything about him just seemed backward. We spent so many afternoons playing dress up. He loved to piss off his Jehovah's Witness, psalm spouting mother and I loved to help. Sometimes he would don one of my fifty cent Salvation Army prom dresses and I would wear a tux, complete with tails. We were so glam. No one liked either of us and we didn't care. We had each other. I always thought that we were perfect together. I overlooked how feminine he was. I didn't want to see it. I was so deep in angsty teenage love that I refused to admit that Trebor was gay.

Between his homosexuality and my beginning to be invisible, there was no way that Trebor and I would last. Soon he stopped returning my letters. There was no more vanilla soft-serve ice cream or savored secret cigarettes away from the hawk eyes of my mother. He stopped being my other half. He stopped looking at me. He made other, visible friends. I hated them all. They could possess him in a way that this invisible girl never could.

The proof of my full transition into an apparition came in my sophomore year of high school. I found myself in Ms DeCostal's A-level English class. Her classroom was pretty typical. Upon my entrance I smelled musty books and the ghosts of thirty adolescents packed into close quarters. Ms. DeCostal's classroom quite accurately depicted how she herself was...cold. There were no Garfield posters or depiction's of Charlie Brown and the gang holding hands surrounding a cartoon earth captioned, *"Everyone Smiles in the Same Language."* No, her walls were bare. She herself was a somewhat plain woman, but I suppose that one could argue that all high school English teachers look the same. Most of them have a look as though their brains have given into a mind-numbing process of public education. The eyes are flat, devoid of passion that they once felt for Eliot or Vonnegut. Listless is the best word for a burnt-out English teacher. They have given up, given in. The oldish hens start packing on the pounds from shoving candy bars in their faces while devouring the newest Danielle Steele

novel in the teacher's lounge or they become cold and hard, unable to stomach even their monotonous speeches never mind food. The men become balder and more smarmy looking. They leer and drool over the fresh meat that is a sixteen year old girl. This is not true of all English Teachers. Some of the most beautiful faces I have ever known, the faces who helped me through my invisibility, have been English teachers. Ms. DeCostal was not one of these beautiful faces. She had dainty features framed by an ash blond page boy. She was very thin and in her youth may have been considered quite lovely. She always seemed to speak in a sharp, peeved tone. It was a clipped way of speaking, sharp, like her icy blue eyes.

From the very first day I knew she couldn't see me. I had come to class wearing my hair piled on top of my head in two piles, shaped into something resembling teddy bear ears. Around my neck was a red patent leather cat collar studded with rhinestones. It was too tight so if I was going upstairs or doing anything requiring exertion I had to remove it or else turn purple and start to suffocate. I wore my favorite black polyester blouse and a floor length pencil-straight black skirt. With my pink Doctor Martens as the crowning piece of my ensemble I didn't see how she could miss me. Still, she did.

Even when we all went around to introduce ourselves and name a future goal I wasn't heard. The boys to the right of me said, "Hi, my name's Matt, and when I grow up I want to make lots of money," or something equally inane. Everyone said, "Hi Matt." It went on and on that way. Names were told and comments exchanged after each introduction. Finally, it was my turn. "Um, my name's Gail and someday I'd like to make a friend." Total silence. It was as if no one had even spoken. I guess in their minds no one had. To them my voice was just a silent lull between activities.

Everyday after that I would plod into DeCostal's class, make a dramatic entrance, and sit down to arrange myself as loudly as I possibly could. I was always late for class. Most days you could find me making my exit from the

girls' room minutes after the bell rang. The girls' room was two thick, brown wooden doors down from Ms DeCostal's class. I would finish smoking my cigarette (or joint if I was lucky enough to have) in the pink stall of the girls' room and leave the bathroom with the last hot mouthful of smoke in my mouth and exhale the stale breath into the air as I entered the classroom. It wasn't ever a lot of smoke, but enough to barely see and definitely smell. Rarely did anyone even glance in my direction. I began the year eagerly sitting in the center of the front row. I was so hungry for knowledge and still harbored faith that these teachers could satiate me with their wisdom. All the other supposed accelerated minds would file in and around me, paying no attention to the space I was pretty sure my body was taking up. Sometimes I wasn't too sure anymore. Coming into class, Pinkerton's prodigies wouldn't even break from their discussions about the National Honor Society, who had a better GPA, or who was applying for early acceptance to whatever schools these pseudo-intellectual brats went to learn to make their millions and how to build a better bomb. I just sat there and watched this mental masturbation day after day. All they wanted to do was talk about their badges of academic accomplishment, not realizing that good grades and lots of extracurricular activities don't always make you a good human being. Ms. DeCostal helped foster this belief that grades can make you a god. Sometimes I would think that I caught of the kids nodding at me or giving me an embarrassed crooked smile. Soon even these glances stopped. I just assumed that they were some of the last to catch a glimpse of me before I totally disappeared.

The year dragged on, with nothing I ever said being heard anymore. No one was interested on my take on the Proles in 1984 or that I had already read *Brave New World* several times. I remember one day we had to write poems and bring them into class to read them aloud. We just went around the circle of the room so I knew I had too have my turn. I read my poem in a loud and confident voice, straining to be louder than my suspicion that no one could see me. Who

knows, the poem may have been about my vagina or how much I hated the bitch who sat next to me. I don't remember, but I'm sure it was real. I do recall the silence after I spoke. Always the silence.

My front and center seat slowly turned into a seat toward the rear of the class, and eventually into the seat far removed from the rest of the class against the back wall of the classroom. In the beginning of the year Ms. DeCostal would pose questions to the entire class, and a few hands (mine included) would shoot up. I was never called. Even when I was the only one with my hand up she would glance around the class and finally say, "No one knows the answer?" Soon I stopped making the effort of lifting my arm. I never had to do presentations like the rest of the students did. The two most frightening words I could think of were "group work." Inevitably I would end up working alone.

One particular class we were reading Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities*. I have always hated Dickens. I read the damned book and was more than willing to discuss it. DeCostal announced we would be working with partners to discuss the chapters we had read the previous night. At this dread welled up in me like shit in a backed up toilet. Everyone in the class paired off immediately. I looked around frantically for someone to approach and saw Abby standing alone. Abby was my neighbor, a former friend and future student at MIT. I thought I was safe. Finally, someone who *knew* me. We'd grown up together, for Christ's sake. We had formed a club in my backyard called the Funky Monkeys and entered a lip synch contest where we sang *Lollypop* with hand puppets that held giant cardboard confections. We didn't win. Now, years later, I made my way toward her. Within two feet of her I heard Abby say, "Ms. DeCostal, being there that there's an odd number of people in class I'm going to join Kelly and Shannon's group, okay?"

"That's fine, Abby," she replied.

"But, there isn't an odd number of people in the class. I'm here!" I wanted to scream. Who knows, maybe I did. Still, I worked alone.

I thought it strange that I should suffer from being invisible, yet I could still see myself in the mirror. I remember looking closely at my reflection in the pink tiled girls' room mirror one day before class. I slowly came from the left, as if to creep up on the mirror. I thought that maybe that instant I really wouldn't be there. Still, I saw the left side of my long strawberry blond hair come into sight, followed by the angle of my left cheek bone. Next I saw my left eye. It resembled the color snot turns just before you get a really bad chest cold. I saw the freckles that peppered my face. I always thought I looked like someone had stomped in a mud puddle and the dirt had managed to reach my face but I was unable to clean it off. The left side of my mouth came into view next. These were lips that I'd to grow into. As a child my face just looked like two huge big lips with the rest of my face proportionate to that of a child's. I flicked my pink tongue coated with yellow from cigarettes and coffee over the pink, worm-like scar under my lower lip to make sure it was real. I had always been grateful that most of my facial expressions covered that scar, but now it comforted me to see it. It was almost like proof of my existence. I reached up to touch my face with my pudgy, somewhat clammy fingers. Yep, I could still feel my face. Next I reached over to feel the cool silver of the mirror, to touch my reflection. I could definitely see myself, why couldn't these nit wits? Didn't these giggling girls sneaking a cigarette before class wonder what the hell this freak was doing pawing herself and the mirror?

I figured that there must be hope if I was still visible to myself. I decided to rebel against being a non-entity the only way I knew how to. I tried to make it so no one could possibly miss me. To my daily lessons I donned pink taffeta dresses with my leopard print combat boots. I dyed my hair the reddest red that I could find and began to super glue plastic stars, insects, and jewels to my face. Still, no one saw me. Even in this glamour I was invisible. So I decided to make my attempts more serious and drastic. I changed my fiery red hair to drab black. I would show up to class clad from head to toe in cleavage exposing black, most

of it my salvation army lingerie. I began to cut my face with razors, so my face was covered with hideous red welts. My eyes were pretty constantly dilated and blood shot from the weed I'd smoked in the girls' room or the hit of Purple Jesus I'd conspicuously dropped at lunch. Still no one saw me, and soon when I looked in the mirror I, too, saw myself fading.

Now don't get me wrong, my being invisible to teachers and people who I have at one time called my friends upset me, but now I was even losing the ability to see myself. So now I had not only to try to make myself visible at school, but also to my very own reflection. This resulted in desperately trying to make myself feel real and perceptible. I started dropping more and more of those pretty-pictured pieces of blotter paper that I was laying down all of my hard-earned lunch money for. All of this artificial searching to become real again was very exhausting, but I guess that invisible girls don't sleep much, because I could never seem to stay in bed for any great length of time unless sleep was induced by more drugs. I generally stopped attending Ms. DeCostal's classes, along with most of the others. Why bother to show up to a class where no one could even see me? The few times I would show up I would be too fucked up to stay coherent and would spend the period drooling all over the desk in the state between awake and asleep.

Finally the exhaustion of being merely a phantom surrounded by functioning, discernible students caught up to me. I needed to be sent to a hospital where the invisible go to rest. When I was through with a long process of rest and rehabilitation, I tried to go to Pinkerton armed with the knowledge that maybe it wasn't really that I was invisible, rather it was fear that kept teachers like Ms. DeCostal from seeing me. As soon as I realized that being invisible is merely a product of fear and other people's insecurities I began to reappear to myself. I knew that each of these people who could not see me had created their own reality through the desire to not have me be in their line of vision. It was that year that I withdrew from Pinkerton Academy in order to

continue to make myself more solid and visible. Before I left I did write Ms.DeCostal a letter on the back of my final exam in English. It said:

Ms. DeCostal,

My name is Gail. Believe it or not I was in your class all year. I find it somewhat ironic that you would pass a student with an A-average despite the fact that you would never acknowledge my presence in your class. I know now that it was out of fear and ignorance that you chose to pretend that I was not a functioning member of your classroom. It has been incredibly damaging to be made invisible by a woman that should have been a role model.

Gail

(that girl in the back of the room)

From time to time since then I have seen her in the supermarket or at a bookstore and I always make sure to look her dead in the eye. She still looks beyond me.

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PROJECT TITLE Dis/Abling Literacy Narratives: Revising a Sense of the Writer's Self

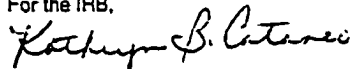
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For the IRB,



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English Department

Consent to Publish

I agree to the publication of my poem "Contrary To Rule" to be used in a dissertation written by Stephanie Paterson, entitled, "*Dis/Abling Literacy Narratives: Revising the Writer's Sense of Self*" as well any further publications Ms. Paterson will do on the topic.

Signed: Kimberly Cloutier Green

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Date: 10-3-00

Stephanie Paterson

From: "John McPherson" <closetohome@compuserve.com>
To: "Stephanie Paterson" <stephp@loa.com>
Sent: Tuesday, April 03, 2001 12:39 AM
Subject: A Plea For Your Permission

hi, Stephanie!

By all means feel free to use my cartoon in your dissertation. I'm honored.

Best regards,

John McPherson